



Campfire Girls on a Hike

Campfire Girls on a Hike;

OR,

Lost in the Great North Woods

BY STELLA M. FRANCIS



Made in U. S. A.

M. A. DONOHUE & CO.
CHICAGO NEW YORK

Campfire Girls' Series

**Campfire Girls in the Alleghany
Mountains;**

Or, A Christmas Success Against Odds

Campfire Girls in the Country;

Or, The Secret Aunt Hannah Forgot

Campfire Girls' Trip Up the River;

Or, Ethel Hollister's First Lesson

Campfire Girls' Outing;

Or, Ethel Hollister's Second Summer in Camp

Campfire Girls on a Hike;

Or, Lost in the Great North Woods

Campfire Girls at Twin Lakes;

Or, The Quest of a Summer Vacation

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CHICAGO

"Camp Fire Girls on a Hike"

OR

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By STELLA M. FRANCIS

CHAPTER I.

LETTERS FROM RUTH.

Marie Crismore and Violet Munday compared notes afterward and decided that they must have received and read two letters from Ruth Hazelton dealing with the same subject and written in almost the same phraseology at exactly the same time. Marie lived in Brooklyn and Violet in Newark, N. J. Ruth mailed the letters together in a mailbox near her home in Boston.

Marie informed Violet that she had been down town shopping and that the suburban train on which she returned arrived at "her" station "at ten minutes to four." That was the regular scheduled time for this train and "it was never late." She went directly home, a distance of three blocks, she said, and found Ruth's letter, which she read before she even took off her hat.

Violet was at home when the postman called.

"He's the most punctual postman you ever heard of," she declared to Marie afterward. "He gets at our house at almost the same time every afternoon, and in the morning, too, for that matter. But his afternoon calls have impressed themselves on my memory more strikingly for this reason. Get that word strikingly, Marie," Violet parenthesized with a merry twinkle in her eye; "for it has a deep and subtle significance. Many a time I've answered the mailman's ring just as the gong on the mantel was striking four.

"Now, I wouldn't swear to it, for a life and death certainty, but I am almost positive I can hear the echo of that gong as I recall the first sentence of Ruth's letter, which I opened and read at once."

But this is getting ahead of the story. Let us go back and take up the thread of events where we began to anticipate. The letter received by Violet, which was similar in phrase and substance to the one received by Marie, was as follows:

"Dear Violet:

"I'm writing this letter in as big a hurry as ever I can, and I want you to answer it as soon as possible. I am writing to Marie Crismore, too, and putting the matter up to her in the same way.

"Father is going up into Northern Maine on business regarding some timber land. He has told brother Fred and me that we may go with him, but if Fred does what he pro-

poses to do it will be almost impossible for me to go unless you or Marie or both of you will go, too. Father is going to make a trip by auto miles up in the timber and Fred wants to go with him. That would leave me alone among strangers in a town of about 2,000 inhabitants. To be sure, there is an abundance of scenery and a lake and boats at the place, but one cannot enjoy such things alone unless one is a poet, and that is just what I am not. The trip into the timber will take a week or more. Father says he knows some very nice people up there, but I don't want to be left alone even with very nice strangers.

"Now it occurred to me that this would be an excellent opportunity for you, Marie, and myself to earn some Blue Honors and at the same time enjoy an outing in a part of the country entirely new to us. I have read a good deal about the Maine woods and through this reading they have developed such a charm for me that, I am sure, if I were given a choice between an excursion to the Grand Canyon and a trip into Northern Maine right now, I'd choose Northern Maine.

"We three girls have been making a specialty of nature lore for Camp Fire honors for several months, and it seems to me that this is a dandy opportunity for us to 'go over the top' in great style. We'd take a hike every day we were up there and gather all kinds of information regarding trees and flowers and

insects and birds and wild animals, yes, real wild animals—deer and maybe some moose, if we can get close enough to them; and porcupine—they say there are lots of them in that country. Did you ever see a porcupine outside of a zoo?

“What do you say, Violet? If you can go, telegraph you are coming. Father and Fred start Monday. We won’t be gone longer than two weeks, and you will have two weeks after that to spend at home before school opens. Bring only your hurry-up outing outfit, but come prepared to keep warm in a place where the temperature seldom goes above 70 degrees Fahrenheit in midsummer.

“Yours in a hurry and hope (to see you soon).

RUTH HAZELTON.”

Next day Ruth received two telegrams which delighted her as little else could have done. Their wording and contents are of little consequence here, except for the announcement that Violet and Marie had both accepted the invitation and were making hurried preparations for the journey to Boston, which was to be the starting point for the excursion into the far Northern woods.

They arrived at Ruth’s home on Saturday and early Monday morning the party of five took passage on an International line steamboat bound for Eastport, Me. The trip to this place consumed twenty-four hours, and soon after their arrival, they transferred to

another and smaller steamboat bound for Calais, from which point they continued their journey on the Canada and New Brunswick railroad.

For several hours their railroad trip was over New Brunswick territory but at last they got back into Maine, in which state their first stop was the town of Houlton. From this place they continued west and north, terminating their journey at last at a town called Portage on a lake which bore the name of Tamarack.

CHAPTER II.

IN MAINE.

Ruth Hazelton, Marie Crismore, and Violet Munday, were members of Flamingo Camp Fire, which constituted one of many similar units of a Camp Fire Girls' school known as Hiawatha Institute. They had had some stirring adventures during the early part of the current vacation season while camping at two different places, and the present excursion was entirely unexpected and apart from their plans when the thirteen Flamingoites separated for their several homes, to meet again next, it was generally understood, at the opening of the fall-and-early-winter school semester.

In the course of the journey from Boston Mr. Hazelton explained to his traveling companions the nature of the business that had sent him on this excursion into the northern Maine woods. He was an attorney, and one of his principal clients was the Boston and Maine Lumber company, a wealthy corporation which made it one of its chief concerns to watch closely the remnant lumbering possibilities of the northeasternmost state of New England.

Away up in the northern part of the state, he told his interested audience, was an expanse of several thousand acres of timber

land, which had scarcely been touched with ax or saw for sixty years, and then not very extensively. These acres were covered with an abundant growth of white pine, also spruce, hemlock, balsam fir, walnut, birch and other varieties of relatively less importance. This land belonged to a trust estate of a deceased citizen of Maine, who in his will presented something of an analysis of the lumber outlook of the country, expressing the opinion that there was great danger that all New England would become denuded of her forests in the course of the next half century, and stipulating that not one tree be cut from his lands during that period of time.

This "forest preserve" limit stipulated in the will of Jules Nelson, the queer old land owner, but, nevertheless, very wise lumber prophet of the state, would expire in a few weeks, and arrangements were being made by the company which Mr. Hazelton represented to purchase the land and harvest the millions of feet of lumber awaiting the tree-cutter's saw and the sawmill. For weeks a crew of "cruisers," or expert forest rangers, had been tramping through the woods, inspecting the trees for the purpose of estimating the value of the standing lumber on the vast timber acreage under negotiations, and were nearly ready to report. Mr. Hazelton was going to the main lodge of these "cruisers" to receive their report and to make a personal inspection of such statements and

conditions as his business sagacity might dictate.

At the Portage depot, the party was met by a Mr. Stevens, a local attorney, who had acted under instructions from Mr. Hazelton as counsel for the Boston and Maine Lumber Company on several occasions. He accompanied the visitors to the best hotel in the city, at the same time extending the courtesies of his home to them during their stay in the town. In the evening they were guests at his home for dinner.

Mr. Stevens had two daughters, Grace and Iva, 16 and 19 years old respectively. Ruth, Marie, and Violet were much pleased with their personality, although they proved to be distinctly different in some respects from the "city girls" with whom the three Camp Fire guests had been accustomed to associate. They were as curious relative to big-city life as their guests were concerning this little-cultivated, thinly settled country of white pine, spruce, hemlock, balsam fir, and tamarack.

"When I was a little girl, not yet old enough to do much reading for myself," said Ruth in the course of the evening's visit; "my mother read me a story called 'Under the Tamaracks.' I never forgot that story. I was so intensely interested that I guess it cast a kind of charm about that word tamarack in my mind, and I have always wanted to visit a real tamarack country."

"You'll find plenty of them here," Iva returned. "That's how the lake here got its name. Tamaracks grow almost all around it more thickly than any other kind of tree. Would you like to go and see them tomorrow?"

"Very much," Ruth replied. "How about you, girls?" addressing Marie and Violet.

"That'll be our first move for Blue Honors," Violet suggested. "Let's go through our lists and get as much advance information on our subjects as possible so that we may be prepared to accomplish something tomorrow."

Grace and Iva were curious at once as to the meaning of this suggestion which resulted in a lengthy discussion of the Camp Fire rules, regulations, duties, and scheme of honors for the benefit of two maidens of Northern Maine, to whom the organization had hitherto meant little more than a name expressing the picture-idea of a tent, a fire, and a group of girls.

CHAPTER III.

CAMP FIRE COACHING.

In the course of the evening the conversation among the girls turned incidentally upon various Camp Fire topics, and Grace and Iva exhibited so much interest in the organization and its work that Ruth determined to find out why. She learned, on inquiry, that there was a dearth of social life and recreations for the young folks of Portage, and that as a consequence the two Stevens girls had become out-of-door girls in the major portion of their activities. They liked to read, too, but most of their reading was of out-door life, and among the books they possessed was a set of Camp Fire volumes which they had purchased at random because of their outing titles rather than because of any personal interest in the Camp Fire organization.

But the reading of these books had awakened in them an interest in Camp Fire Girls, which promised to ripen into fruitful results if given an opportunity. The fact that there were thousands of girls in the United States making a systematic study of nature and of their daily occupations, just as a skilled checker player studies the checker-board, or the crochet artist studies a lace pattern, aroused in them not a little inquisitive wonder.

"These Camp Fire books that we have are dandy books," said Grace; "but there is one important thing lacking in them. They work up an intense interest in the girl characters and drop a lot of hints here and there about the organization, but that is about as far as they go. They don't tell you anything about how to organize a Camp Fire or where to go for information on the subject."

"Oh, that is not the purpose of such books," Violet replied. "These books are intended to give entertainment and useful incidental hints to Camp Fire Girls or girls who know the fundamentals of the organization. I've read these books and found them very interesting, but if you want to organize a Camp Fire, you'll need something else; you ought to have a handbook."

"Could we organize a chapter here?" Eva inquired.

"Surely," Ruth replied; "but we don't speak of these divisions as chapters. We call them Camp Fires."

"Why do you call them Camp Fires?" asked Eva.

"Because each division holds its ceremonies around a fire. The building of the fire is an interesting ceremony in itself."

"It would be lots of fun to organize a chapter—I mean a Camp Fire—here in Portage," Grace said eagerly. "How should we go about to do it?"

"How many girls do you think would like to join?" Ruth questioned.

"I think we could interest eight besides ourselves," Grace answered.

"Are they all good friends of yours, sensible, well tempered, and not much different from yourselves in their likes and dislikes?"

"Yes, I think so."

"Then you have enough good material to organize a Camp Fire," Ruth announced encouragingly. "The minimum number that can be organized into a unit group is six, and they must all be twelve years or older. It is better to have from ten to fourteen girls in one Camp Fire, if you can get that many who are congenial, but if not, six or eight will do. Then you must have a Guardian, who must be a woman over 21 years old. Have you somebody for that position?"

"How about mother?" suggested Iva.

"Fine," said Ruth. "Mothers who take an interest in Camp Fire work make excellent guardians."

"How long are you girls going to be here?" Grace inquired.

"About ten days, I think," Ruth replied. "It depends on how rapid is the progress of the work father is interested in."

"Would you be willing to help us start a Camp Fire organization?"

"We'd be glad to, wouldn't we, girls?" said Ruth, addressing the latter part of her sentence to Violet and Marie, who assented

eagerly. "It would be just the experience I'd like to have. You see, I hope to be a Guardian myself when I am old enough."

"Wouldn't you like to come here and stay with us while you are in Portage?" Grace suggested. "I spoke to mama about it, and she'd be delighted to have you here."

"I'm afraid you'd have too many in the house," Ruth replied hesitantly. "It wouldn't be so bad if we were only one or even two, but 'three is a crowd,' you know."

"That's what we want—a 'crowd' just that size," Iva interposed. "You mustn't stay in that hotel. It's the best in town, but not a bit homelike, and you're sure to get awful lonesome. Besides, you see, father is going away with Mr. Hazelton, and mother, Iva, and I will be lonesome here if you don't come and stay with us."

Ruth spoke to her father about the proposition and as he had no objection, it was agreed that the three Camp Fire Girls should cause their baggage to be transferred to the Stevens home on the following day. As they bade their new friends good-night and departed for the hotel, it was with the understanding that they were to return on the following day and begin work at once on the organization of the first Camp Fire of Portage.

CHAPTER IV.

THE ROBBERY.

The preliminary work of organizing a Camp Fire among friends of the two Stevens girls progressed rapidly. The first step was to get in touch with all the prospective applicants in order to make certain how many and who could be counted on to make up the initial membership. This was done partly by telephone and partly by personal calls. Seven of the eight girls whom Grace and Iva had in mind as "good prospects" manifested an eagerness to become members of the proposed organization; the eighth said she would be delighted to join, but her parents had just sold their home and were about to move out of town.

Each of the visiting Camp Fire Girls had brought a handbook with her, and Violet offered hers for the use of the candidates until they could obtain copies. Then a letter was written to the National Board, asking for membership blanks for the proposed members and guardian. Several days would elapse before these arrived, but meanwhile the three young coaches planned to put their pupils through such a course of instruction that when the time came for actual organization they could go through the ritualistic ceremony in good form and without hesitation or mistake.

The close of the first day of the visit at Portage saw the three Camp Fire visitors pretty well acquainted with the physical layout of the city, which of itself was not particularly interesting. The lake, however, was very beautiful, being surrounded for the most part by hills of no inconsiderable size, covered with an abundant growth of trees characteristic of that part of the state.

Portage is not a summer resort, as the term is popularly understood. The locality, nevertheless, is very popular—indeed, some enthusiasts call it “famous”—for hunting and fishing. Aside from the well-known larger game, such as moose, bear, and deer, the forests abound in wild geese, ducks, brant, teal, partridges, and quail, and the lakes and streams are alive with salmon, togue, trout, sturgeon, bars, and pickerel.

In season, Portage is a rendezvous for the kind of resorters whose sporting enthusiasm registers the days and the months on calendars of cured hide with wild quill pens dipped in the blood of game that hunters the world over call “royal.” But the season was not yet arrived for these annual invaders of the peacefulness of the woods and the water. Hence, Portage was as yet a “dead town,” barring the presence of a few visitors, whose advent there indicated, for the most part, a natural love for the wilderness, cool and hardy and free from all suggestion of the luxurious and slimy abandon of the tropics.

Mr. Hazelton and Mr. Stevens devoted the first day following the former's arrival to a discussion of the situation with reference to the purchase of the timberland estate and to preparations for the journey that the visiting attorney planned to take to the lodge of the "cruisers" who had been making an estimate of the millions of feet of uncut lumber. Mr. Stevens had an automobile and Mr. Hazelton engaged another, it being a part of the plan, completed since the arrival at Portage, to take all the five girls for a motor trip to the distant retreat in the forest and send them back on the same day with Mr. Stevens. Mr. Hazelton and Fred proposed to remain with one of the machines in the woods for about a week while the attorney made a thorough review of the work of the cruisers.

Everything was ready for an early start. The girls had prepared enough sandwiches, pie, cake, et cetera, for two lunches for the party, and Mr. Hazelton and Fred had stored in their automobile a supply of imperishables to supplement the fare that awaited them at the "cruisers' " lodge.

The girls arose at 5:30 next morning and sat down to breakfast at 6:10. By 6:30, they were ready for the trip and waiting for the arrival of the automobiles. The plan had been to start at 6:30, or as soon thereafter as possible, and as the minutes sped swiftly toward this half-hour the girl breakfasters

feared they would not be ready when the machines drove up to take them away.

But their fears in this regard were not well grounded, for 6:40, 6:50, 7 o'clock arrived, and still no sign of the automobiles, Mr. Hazelton, Mr. Stevens, or Fred. Mr. Stevens had had his breakfast while the girls were getting ready for theirs, and left the house before they got into the dining room.

"Something must have delayed them," Grace observed as the clock struck the hour of 7. "They were so eager to get an early start that a delay of half an hour makes me afraid something has happened."

"Probably nothing very serious," Ruth said hopefully. "They'll be coming along pretty soon."

But half an hour more passed and still the girls waited and nobody appeared. Then the monotony of the wait was broken by the ringing of the telephone. Mrs. Stevens answered it.

The girls waited eagerly for the message, being confident that it was from the father of Grace and Iva. They were right; and it soon became evident that Grace's apprehension of some untoward occurrence was well grounded.

"I bet one of the engines is broken and they have to get another machine," Iva ventured.

"Let's hope it's only a puncture," Violet suggested optimistically.

"Or that the hotel man forgot to wake father and Fred at the time they told him to," Ruth suggested.

The discussion was suddenly broken off by an exclamation from Mrs. Stevens, who was at the telephone.

"What!"

Nine persons out of ten would have uttered the same word in the same way under the same circumstances. Behind it were unmistakable surprise and dismay. Mrs. Stevens continued to listen, evidently to further details of the unwelcome news, while her two daughters and their guests waited apprehensively for an explanation. She asked a question or two and listened a little longer; then she turned to the girls and said abruptly:

"The First National bank was robbed last night. Burglars broke in, blew open the safe, and got away with \$10,000. Mr. Stevens is an officer of the bank and its attorney and won't be able to make the trip into the woods today."

CHAPTER V.

THE AUTO TRIP

"Your father says you may go with the Hazeltons as you planned to do," continued Mrs. Stevens, addressing Grace and Iva, after she had communicated to the girls all she knew about the robbery. "But he had to find somebody else to drive his machine."

"I don't like the idea of going away from home even for a day after such an occurrence as this," said Grace slowly.

"You'd better not let that hinder you," her mother advised. "Your father says it is a serious blow to the bank, but not fatal, at least not fatal to us. Anyway, you could be of no particular assistance here if you remained."

"How soon do they expect now to make the start?" Iva inquired.

"In about an hour," Mrs. Stevens replied. "Your father said he had engaged Arthur Wolf, the son of the garage owner, to drive the machine in his place and bring you back before dark, but he will not be able to get here before 8:30."

A few minutes later Mr. Hazelton and Fred arrived in a machine. Fred, who was a skilled driver, was at the wheel. They had few details to add concerning the burglary, except that the guard who slept in the bank had been discovered bound hand and foot and that an armed posse of civilians was being organized

to make a thorough search of the country round about for the robbers. If, as seemed probable, the crime was committed by some of the criminal element that mingled here and there with the rough denizens of the Maine woods, it was hardly probable that they made their get-away with an automobile or with horses. The day of automobile bandits had not yet dawned for this frontier section of New England.

Mr. Stevens' substitute chauffeur did not disappoint them by failing to appear at the time when he said he would come prepared to make the trip. He drove up to the house at 8.25, according to Ruth's wrist watch, and a few minutes later all were in the machine and ready to start.

The girls all got into the larger automobile driven by Arthur Wolf. Both machines had tops with open sides, which served very well to protect passengers not only against rain and sun, but also against overhanging bushes and tree branches along the timber-arched highways.

The early part of the journey was over a fairly well-kept road, which skirted the southern side and northern end of the lake and then turned north again and pursued a winding course through the dense timber and around bluffs and hills or "baby mountains."

This road was one of the main highways through the northern part of the state and, considering the wildness and sparsely settled

state of the country, was in good condition. For years it had been a mail and stage road and still was used, in a modified way, for those purposes.

The scene along the lake shore route was beautiful. The principal business street of Portage runs close up to the edge of the lake, forming a letter T in conjunction with another street running at right angles to it and along the shore. The "cross" of this T is known as Dock street and is bordered on the shore side with a score of boat houses and jetty landings.

To the west of the town the ground settles almost to the water's edge, and this low shore-land widens out in places as much as a quarter of a mile. If it were not for the peculiar vegetation made possible by this semi-swampy condition, the effect would be quite the opposite of beauty, but beauty is there in good earnest.

Back of the low-land margin is a row of lofty hills, so evenly continuous as to form almost an unbroken ridge almost half way around the lake, which is seven or eight miles in circumference. High up along the side of these hills, with here and there an occasional tip toward the level of the lake, runs the old stage road, over which bowled the two automobiles containing the party bound for the camp of the "cruisers," twenty miles away to the northwest. And from this road the travelers could look down over a dense growth

of tamaracks on the swampy margin and into the clear water of the lake that had taken its name from the larch-like arborial border.

The three Camp Fire Girls were charmed with the scene. It was almost as novel as looking down from a mountain top into a mass of clouds that are precipitating a shower of rain into a valley below. The Stevens girls, of course, were used to the scene and regarded it more as a matter of course, but Ruth, Marie and Violet had to do just a little "gushing," as they afterward styled their exclamations of eagerness and wonder.

It was a terraced view on a grand scale. Above them, to the left, the ridge of hills arose, lofty with an evergreen headgear of magnificent hemlock, pine, spruce, and fir trees. The road ran along an almost continuous shelf or side-hill, half-way up the main elevation, and where it was not by nature unbroken, the route was made continuous by hauling and filling and grading, or excavating, so that no hurdles remained in the way to impede transit.

On went the automobiles, along the shelf-road, occasionally dipping down into a graded hollow, and now and then climbing a steep incline as if the effort were merely the expression of a recreation thrill. Beyond the lake to the northwest the road left the ridge of hills and continued along an avenue cut through the woods and typical of a country composed of alternating level stretches, depressions, and elevations.

CHAPTER VI.

THE RETURN

The trip to the "cruisers' " camp required less than two hours, thanks to the climbing qualities of the two roadsters. Meanwhile, Ruth, Violet, and Marie improved their opportunities to good advantage and incidentally gave their two pupils a few lessons on the subject of winning Camp Fire honors for promotion.

All three were Fire Makers. In the early part of the summer vacation they had advanced their records so successfully that they were able to qualify for purple and elective beads in a manner that aroused hearty enthusiasm and applause from all the other members of the Camp Fire at the ceremonial.

They took their note books with them on this trip into the Maine woods. In the books they had made entry of the elective honors—fifteen for each—that they had selected to win in order to qualify as Torch Bearers. Many of these were Blue Honors, to win which they must increase their knowledge of wild nature to a considerable extent.

For instance, all three of them had elected to learn how to "identify and describe any fifteen trees in such way as to assure future recognition," "to identify and describe twenty wild flowers" and "to identify and describe

twenty wild birds." Marie had elected also to "identify and describe ten butterflies" and to "know the songs and calls of ten different wild birds." Violet had adopted the additional tasks of making a record, from personal observation, of the "food of six different wild birds," and of "telling the value of two birds to man from personal observations." Ruth aspired to be able to "identify ten plants by their odor," and "identify ten plants by their feeling." She was also "keeping a list, with dates, of all the wild birds seen during one season."

With note books close at hand and their minds alert to every opportunity to acquire, reinforce, or corroborate a bit of information in line with their scheduled honor programmes, it is small wonder that this trip was an intensely typical Camp Fire trip. Every bird that flew within near view from the girls' automobile, every cluster of wild flowers growing at the side of the road, every tree of unusual size or specially interesting or novel appearance was an object of special attention and discussion. Ordinarily this rapid-transit study would have produced little more than general impressionistic results, but the driver of the machine proved to be a mine of information. Hardly a topic of woodcraft or birdcraft was touched upon by the girls but he was able to discuss it with all of the intimacy of "The Barefoot Boy" and some solid substantial information that might

have caused a high-brow professor to "sit up and take notice."

At last they turned from the main highway into a drive which was little more than a path, but which fortunately, with careful driving, afforded passage for the machines. A run of half a mile along this way brought them to a log house large enough to accommodate a dozen men, logging-camp style. This house, which was a square thatched affair of the crudest kind of carpentry, was built right in the thick of the timber. In front was a stone firepit with forked stakes on opposite sides for suspending an iron kettle on a pole over the fire. A boy about 14 years old was removing the ashes, which had accumulated almost to the edge of the pit. He ceased his labors as the two automobiles drove up and advanced toward the leading machine, indicating by his manner that he was expecting their arrival.

"Hello, Eddie," called out Arthur Wolf, the driver of the girls' auto. "Everybody away?"

"Yes," replied the camp-boy. "They've all been gone since morning. They're workin' several miles north an' west o' here now, and it'll be late before they get back tonight."

Arthur introduced the visitors. Eddie acknowledged the introduction awkwardly, and with some embarrassment when he was presented to the girls.

There was little for Mr. Hazelton to do now except wait for the leader of the gang of tim-

bermen, and if it had not been for the presence of the girls and the purpose of their trip with him into the Maine woods, he would have found the wait tedious and dull. As it was, however, the girls got him interested in a number of things which recalled to his mind elements of younger days which he had totally forgotten.

They had a "basket-picnic lunch," which especially delighted the camp boy, who was a son of one of the "cruisers" and had spent most of his life in the woods. Then they went to the river, which was only a short distance away, and there Ruth, Marie, and Violet gave an exhibition of their methods of winning bird, tree, butterfly, insect and flower honors.

Each of them had a small handbook on New England plant and animal life, which they had read carefully. They carried these books now for reference use, but it was surprising how many flowers, grasses, trees, small timber animals, and insects they were able to identify from mere memory of the descriptions they had read.

At about 3 o'clock the girls started back for Portage in the automobile driven by Arthur Wolf. The trip could be made, with easy driving in two hours, barring untoward accidents.

All went well for nearly half an hour after they struck the main road. Indeed, there was little farther from their minds than that everything should go well during the entire

journey. If they had been called upon to give a description of a ride such as they had taken into the timber, it probably would never have occurred to them to remark that everything went well up to any point or during the entire journey. Such a remark would have seemed too matter-of-course, too commonplace.

But in this case the assertion that everything went well up to the **time** when things did not go well was fitting. At this juncture the girls were in the midst of a discussion of plans for the next day, plans for a hike into the woods, along the road that ran through the terrace of tamaracks, spruce and hemlocks, when they came to a slight turn in the road at the foot of a steep hill up which the highway continued.

For that moment, and for a good many moments afterward, the girls could scarcely believe the evidence before their eyes, evidence of something which comes into the lives of comparatively few denizens of the earth.

Before they had time to acknowledge even to themselves the character of the adventure they had ridden right into, Arthur brought the automobile to a sudden stop. Directly in front of the party, stood three rough-looking men with half-masks on their faces and death-threatening rifles aimed ominously at them.

CHAPTER VII.

"GENTLEMEN FIRST."

A masked robber with a gun in his hand is a rare creature. Three creatures of this description would be three times as rare, if negatives were computed with the multiplication table, except in theory.

But the five Camp Fire Girls and their automobile driver did not regard these three rarities in any such light. To them, they appeared to be in sufficient number to convey the idea of multitude and ubiquity. If a meteor drops in your back yard, you can easily imagine a hundred others dropping into the back yards of a hundred of your fellow townsmen. And yet such happenings are exceedingly rare events.

As it happened, however, Ruth, Violet, and Marie had been in somewhat similar situations on other occasions, and so they had acquired a notion that law-breakers were about as common as criminal opportunity. Indeed, Grace and Iva afterward remarked that their three guests seemed to accept the situation as almost a matter of course.

This, however, was not quite true. They were indeed frightened, and might easily have permitted themselves to become panic-stricken, but experience had taught them to steel themselves against the most terrifying situa-

tions. And that is precisely what they did in this situation. They even uttered words of encouragement and reassurance to the two Stevens girls when it appeared that panic was about to get the better of them. In fact, it seemed for a few moments that Iva was on the verge of a collapse.

Violet, who was seated beside the younger of the two sisters, put her arm around the wavering, shrinking girl and held her close, while all awaited developments. They were not long coming.

"Pile out o' there, young ladies," commanded the foremost holdup man. "We hate like all sin to put you to such inconvenience, but it can't be helped a tarnation bit. These is times, you know, when it's gentlemen first and ladies second."

"Why?" Ruth demanded boldly.

"Well, as I live and hope to live again!" exclaimed the first speaker in mock astonishment. "If here ain't a young lady what shows a dispysition to argue with bad men an' bullets."

Ruth, observing the half playful mood of the villain, decided to lead him along the path that seemed to please his lighter fancy.

"Excuse me, Mr. Bullet Bad-Man," she replied with an appearance of strong self-assurance; "but you're very badly mistaken. People who ask questions don't always do so to start an argument. Being interested in ladies as a lady, I was merely seeking information. I

asked you why 'These are times when it's gentlemen first and ladies second'."

"Because we are gentlemen of crippled fortunes what can't ride without limpin,' and you ladies 'ave got all yo' need and 'ave been ridin' around so much that a little exercise o' your feet'll do you a heap o' good."

"But your statement sets forth a general principle, and when I ask for an explanation you narrow it down to something specific that has no general application," Ruth objected, like a professor of psychology criticising a recitation.

"Eh!"

The speaker of the highwaymen was non-plussed, and if it had not been for the fact that his two companions had no interest in, or patience for, that kind of palaver, Ruth might have scored something of a victory. Evidently, he was puzzled by the girl's high-sounding answer to his would-be high-sounding banter.

"Oh, stuff that guff!" ordered another of the men impatiently. "If you're goin' to be a ladies' man, we ain't goin' to let yo' stop our game. Git out o' that machine, gals! We want it fer ourselves, an' we ain't goin' to wait long for it, either."

Without further ado, Ruth unlatched the side door and stepped out of the car, and the other girls followed.

"That's right; I'm glad ye're so obedient," observed the second spokesman as the boy driver made no move to get out of the ma-

chine. "You stay right in there an' obey orders. We want ye ter drive fer us."

The three men got into the auto, and spokesman No. 2, who seemed to have silenced No. 1 completely, ordered Arthur Wolf to turn it around and drive it in the direction from which he and his five passengers had come. The boy cast a few reassuring glances at the girls which were intended to convey to them the message that he would neglect no opportunity to do something for their relief, and they were so understood. A few moments later the automobile, with its new passengers, was speeding away to the north again, rapidly leaving the frightened and awe-stricken girls alone on a wilderness highway and confronted with the probable necessity of spending the night in the dense, dark and sometimes dangerous Maine woods, without food or shelter or protection against any untoward eventuality, except such as their feminine wits might be able to devise.

CHAPTER VIII.

AN EMERGENCY HIKE.

The five girls, abandoned thus unceremoniously in a waste wilderness of woods, fifteen miles from the nearest of their homes, consulted one another for some moments in a language of silence. Any attempt to make it appear that with this language they communicated to one another sentiments more cheerful than dismay would be an unfaithful presentation of the facts. On every countenance there was no room for anything else.

They gazed after the captured automobile, with its captured driver and its captors, until it disappeared from view. This was not long, however, for a slight jog in the road took them around a thicket of timber and bushes.

"Highwaymen!" exclaimed Violet. "And they didn't even offer to relieve us of our valuables."

"That is funny," Marie remarked emphatically. "It didn't occur to me that there was anything strange in their proceedings. But why do you suppose they neglected that?"

"They just wanted an automobile ride," Ruth ventured. "They probably never had an auto ride in their lives before."

"Maybe they wanted to steal the auto, and didn't know how to drive it," Marie suggested.

"That sounds reasonable," said Ruth.

"Our chauffeur wasn't very valiant," Iva remarked with a tone of chagrin in her voice, for she felt the responsibility of her father's selection.

"What else could he have done?" Ruth inquired. "Who do you suppose would have done anything else, with those guns pointing right at him?"

"I admit I don't know that he could have done anything," Iva answered. "But it seems to me that he might—no; I guess I'll hold off a while before expressing my opinion. He may prove himself a hero yet."

"That reminds me that we are here and we'd better decide pretty soon what we ourselves are going to do," said Ruth in warning tones. "We've got to get busy and do something, or we're likely to have to remain in the woods all night."

"Oh, no; not so bad as that, I hope," Grace answered, with a desperate attempt at reassurance, although nothing was more evident than the outlook pictured by Ruth.

"Hadn't we better walk back to the woodmen's cabin?" suggested Marie. "We're not more than five miles from there."

"I'm afraid we'd lose our way," Ruth objected; "and we don't want to run the risk of getting lost in the woods. You remember there were several places where that road in the timber forked in different directions, and I don't believe I could pick the way to the cabin. I don't like the idea of leaving this main road."

"It seems to me that we are not very sure of our way now," Marie ventured in a rather fatalistic tone of voice.

"Why?" asked Iva incredulously. "All we have to do is follow this road back home. It'll be a long walk, but we'll get there finally if we keep on going."

"I'm not so sure about that," Marie answered, with anything but a note of cheer. "Just remember that we passed half a dozen forked cross-roads on our way up here. How many of you are certain you can pick out our road at all at those places? Did you make particular note of our route at those crossings?"

This question startled every one of the girls, even Marie, who did not realize how serious the situation was until she heard her own voice on the subject and "felt" the awed silence that followed. A minute later Iva said:

"In other words, we are lost."

Nobody was rash enough to deny this, but Ruth said courageously:

"We must find our way back. If we put our wits together sharply, I believe we can determine which way we came."

"Then we'd better start at once," said Violet. "We haven't any time to lose. It's after 4 o'clock now. We can't hope to walk back to Portage tonight, but maybe we can find a house along the road where we can stay till morning."

"That's the best idea, I think," Ruth declared. "Come on."

She led the way, and the other girls followed. There was an air of a little more hopefulness in the group, now that they had decided on a plan of action.

"Mother will worry terribly when night comes and we don't appear," said Iva dejectedly. "I'm certain a search party will start out to find us."

"But what can they do in the dark and in these deep woods?" Marie asked.

"Not very much, that's certain," Grace responded. "I'm afraid there isn't much chance of their hunting for us before morning."

"Oh, you're mistaken there!" Iva declared. "I'm certain that, along about 9 or 10 o'clock, they'll be so alarmed at our failure to return that an auto-load of searchers will set out to look for us. They'll figure we've met with an accident and need help, and that if they follow the road they'll find us walking, or dead, or injured, near our wrecked machine."

"I guess you're right, Iva," Grace admitted. "I'm glad you thought of that, for I feel more cheerful now."

"Camp Fire Girls ought not to shrink from a situation like this," Ruth remarked, taking the cue of cheerfulness from Grace, with the view of removing as much of the load of worry as possible from the minds of her companions. "Of course, it's more than we counted on, but we passed the worst when we escaped

injury at the hands of those outlaws. What do you say, girls? Let's call this a hike—a real Camp Fire hike. We're all Camp Fire Girls, or going to be."

"You take my breath away!" Marie exclaimed, with a sorry attempt to appear amused. "You surely ought to be crowned queen of optimists."

"But, really," Ruth insisted, "isn't it a fact that the chief aim of the Camp Fire organization is to train its members to handle everyday problems so well that an emergency difficulty will not make them throw up their hands? Violet and Marie and I have been in as bad, if not worse, situations as this before, and we pulled out all right."

"You must have had some thrilling adventures," Iva inferred.

"Oh, we have, and we'll tell you all about them as we go along, just to show you that this adventure is really a tame one, after all. The only thing that bothers me is the danger of getting lost after night, but we have been trained to be resourceful, and I hope we'll find a way out of this predicament."

"How do you propose to do it?" Grace inquired curiously, but rather pessimistically.

"By keeping our wits busy as we go along," Ruth replied. "We musn't let an important phase of our situation escape us. We must think and plan, and think and plan, and think and plan until we can't think and plan any more."

"And meanwhile we must hike," said Violet.

"Yes, hike," assented Ruth. "Are we going to call this a hike, girls?"

"A real hike," said Marie.

"Not a walk?"

"No, a hike!" chorused the other girls.

"A real Camp Fire emergency hike," Violet added.

"Yes; that's the word—emergency hike," Ruth said eagerly. "It's a happy idea."

"And if we have to camp in the woods tonight, what will we do?" Grace inquired.

"We'll camp Camp Fire style," Violet answered.

"Where are the matches to build a fire?" asked Grace.

"We don't need any."

"Don't need any!" Grace exclaimed incredulously.

"No—why should we?" Ruth returned in a tone of self-confidence.

"We'll start a fire Indian style."

"You don't mean by rubbing sticks?" Iva inquired.

"That's just what I do mean," Ruth answered unhesitatingly. "Fortunately, I brought a pocketknife along, and it's the only thing we need to get ready for the operation. If absolutely up against it, I believe I could perform the stunt without a knife. But, you see, there are a few things we Camp Fire Girls have formed the excellent habit of always carrying with us, unless we are going to a the-

ter or a banquet, and one of them is a knife that will cut. How about you, Violet—did you bring yours?"

"I surely did," the latter replied, producing a strong "whittler" from her skirt pocket.

"So did I," Marie announced before a similar question could be put to her.

"You see what Camp Fire training does for us," Ruth said, addressing Grace and Iva, proudly. "Here we are prepared for something, in spite of a very serious situation. We'll travel along until about an hour and a half before sundown, and then we'll stop at some convenient spot and prepare camp for the night. Maybe our fire will attract attention."

"What will we eat?" asked Iva.

"That's another problem we'll have to solve," Ruth replied. "And still another will be that of finding drinking water. We must look out for a spring. I saw several along the road this morning, and also a lot of berry bushes with ripe berries on them. Fortunately, this is berry time. There are some over there right now. So, you see, there are other things more to be worried about than something to eat."

At this moment Iva made a remark that had a more thrilling effect upon the party than anything else that had been said since they were ordered out of the automobile. And it had the effect of directing their attention to a new danger, far more serious, apparently,

than the mere necessity of going without supper and sleeping on the ground without cover of any sort, in the cool open air of a northern Maine wilderness.

CHAPTER IX.

DANGERS OF THE FOREST.

"I guess we'll find enough to eat, unless we are eaten up ourselves," was the remark made by Iva that started the consternation.

"What do you mean by that?" Ruth inquired with a startled air of suspicion.

"Iva!" Grace interposed reprovably. "What do you want to talk that way for? You ought to be ashamed of yourself. You know there is no great danger of such a thing."

"Great danger?" repeated Ruth inquisitively, with emphasis on the great. "What does she mean—wild animals?"

"Yes; she means wolves, principally. But they never bother anyone in the daytime, and seldom at night."

"Are there many around here?" asked Marie.

"I really don't know," Grace replied. "I never heard of anybody's being attacked by them, at least, not recently. A few have been seen near Portage, but they were cowards and ran at the sight of a human being, even a child."

"Aren't there any other wild animals in these woods?" Violet asked.

"Yes; there are some," Grace replied slowly; "but they're not regarded as dangerous."

"What are they?" Marie inquired. "Any panthers, and wildcats, and bears?"

"Yes; there are all of those in these woods, so they say, but nobody seems to be afraid of them."

"Wouldn't they hurt five helpless girls if they came upon them all alone?" asked Violet.

"No, I don't believe they would," Grace replied, assuming an air of confidence, which she did not feel. "For instance, if a panther should appear fifty yards ahead of us right now, you'd see him scamper away in the woods as if scared half to death."

"Well, I hope we don't meet one, even to see him do that," said Ruth with a shudder. "But how about the wildcats and the bears?"

"The wildcats are little more to be feared than foxes," Grace replied. "They rob chicken-coops. I've never heard of a man's being attacked by one of them. They always run whenever they see a man. As for bears, they are the most courageous animals in the woods, but even they are seldom known to attack human beings."

"Do you really feel as brave concerning those wild beasts as you talk?" Ruth inquired keenly.

"Perhaps not," Grace answered slowly. "Of course, one can't help feeling creepy when talking on such a subject, especially if he knows he's right in the timber where panthers, and bears, and wildcats, and wolves are known to run loose in considerable numbers. It's very probable we won't be molested, but I admit I'd rather not be out in such company."

even though they keep at a respectful distance."

"I noticed that father and Fred brought their rifles along," Ruth added; "but it never occurred to me that they might be looking for any such game as that."

"It's probably the very kind of game they were expecting to look for," Grace replied. "But I don't think they expected to make much of a hunt, for this isn't a good hunting season. They probably carried their guns for protection."

"Then, there is some danger?" Violet interposed quickly.

"Oh, yes; of course, there is some," Grace admitted; "but I'm pretty sure it can be avoided if one is careful."


"My candid opinion," said Ruth with a resolute look on her face, "is that we had better look for a camping place right away, and as soon as we find one get busy gathering a big pile of wood to keep a fire burning all night. That will keep the wild animals at a distance, if any should be near."

"I agree with you, Ruth," said Violet. "Besides, if a search party comes along looking for us, they'll be sure to investigate our fire and find us."

All of the girl hikers expressed approval of this plan, and they began at once a diligent search for a suitable camping site, if possible near a spring of water and a patch of wild berries. Half a mile further on they came to

a small stream which ran beside the road, and as they had passed several berry thickets in the last few hundred yards, they were highly pleased with this discovery.

They selected an open and level plot of ground on the bank of of the stream and then, without further delay, began the task of gathering firewood for the night.



CHAPTER X.

A MYSTERY.

The site selected by the girls for their camp fire was in a large open space on the west side of the road and close to a rocky hill or bluff. So steep was this elevation that it would serve as an excellent protection against a strong east wind during the night.

Ruth, Violet, and Marie taught their two pupils their first big Camp Fire lesson in the course of the next hour during the gathering of firewood and the preparation for the building of a fire. First they called attention to the necessity of selecting a site a considerable distance from the timber line, in order that there might be no danger of setting fire to the forest.

They found an abundance of dead wood on the ground, and the task of gathering fuel was therefore one of sheer strength and energy. The pile, once started, grew rapidly. Meanwhile, at Ruth's suggestion, they all kept their eyes open for pieces of dry wood with which to make a fire Indian style.

In less than an hour they gathered a pile of wood as high as their heads and twelve or fifteen feet in diameter at the base. Then they examined the collection of thoroughly dry material for making "tools" and tinder with which to start their fire.

It was a goodly collection, and from it Ruth, Marie, and Violet selected the following: a balsam fir stick less than an inch in diameter and twelve or fourteen inches long, another short balsam fir stick three inches in diameter, a hemlock knot that could be held firmly in the hand, and a small, bowed hickory limb.

After these had been selected, Ruth took the leather lace from her hiking shoe and attached one end of it to one end of the bowed hickory limb; Marie trimmed the dead twigs from the lighter balsam fir stick and sharpened it at both ends, making one end sharper than the other end; Violet carved and whittled at the hemlock knot until she had flattened it somewhat and gouged a socket in the center of the flattened surface; meanwhile Ruth, laying aside the hickory limb and the shoestring, whittled at the larger piece of balsam fir until she had produced a flat surface two or three inches long and wide, and into this she gouged a socket as sharply cone-shaped as she could. Then she cut a notch in the edge of the flat surface into the socket. After Marie had finished trimming and sharpening her balsam fir stick, she took several splinters of dry cedar and proceeded to shred them between two stones.

The preparations for starting the fire were now complete, and Ruth looped the shoestring once around the smaller balsam fir stick, which was about fifteen inches long, and tied

the other end of the string to the other end of the bowed hickory stick, drawing the string almost taut. Then she fitted the sharper end of the stick into the socket of the heavier piece of balsam fir, fitted the socket of the hemlock knot over the drill and held it there while she drew the bow back and forth, causing the drill to whirl around rapidly. First there was a squeaking sound, followed, as the revolutions of the drill became more rapid, by a shrill whistle. Then a fine brown powder began to run through the notch and onto a leaf that Ruth had placed under the fire-block to receive it; but a little later the powder became black and smoke began to curl up from the drill socket. The smoke grew in volume, and presently a spark was visible. Violet fanned it gently with her khaki hat and pretty soon a tiny blaze leaped up from the powder. Marie was standing close, prepared for this, and dropped a few pinches of shredded cedar on the blaze.

From then on the building of the fire was a simple matter. Grace and Iva were profuse in their expressions of admiration for the success of this primitive performance.

"If there was any doubt in my mind as to whether I wanted to be a Camp Fire Girl, it's gone now," said Iva eagerly. "Why, you girls from big cities already have taught me, living in a country town, things about the wilderness almost at our back door. that I never dreamed of."

"Oh, the Camp Fire is a great educator," said Ruth warmly. "If you go at it with the right spirit, you'll gain no end of useful information."

"By the way," Iva interposed; "I found a dandy patch of berries a short distance back in the woods. Let's some of us go and pick our hats full while Ruth takes care of the fire."

This suggestion met with general approval and Iva, Grace, and Marie started for the berry patch.

"Don't go too far and get lost," warned Violet. "I'll stay here with Ruth and help her keep up the fire. If you girls are uncertain where you are, just call out to us."

Ruth and Violet placed additional fuel on the fire now and then and meanwhile made a dozen or more trips to the edge of the timber for more wood. Half an hour elapsed and they heard nothing from the berry pickers.

"They must have found a good patch of juicy supper," Ruth remarked. "I think I'll call out to them just to make sure they're all right. I suppose they're picking so many berries they don't notice how fast the time is flying."

To carry out this purpose, they went to the edge of the woods, which was about fifty yards from the fire, and there Ruth "yoo-hooed."

Instinctively she hesitated to make a very loud noise, and so they were not greatly sur-

prised when no reply came to her first effort. She called again, this time considerably louder, but still no answer.

"Isn't that strange?" Violet remarked, after the echoes in the timber had died out. "Hello again, as loud as you can."

Ruth did as her companion suggested, and she could not have done better. The "hello" was almost a scream, suggestive of the desperation she was beginning to feel. Still there was no response.

"What can it mean?" Violet exclaimed. "They surely can't have got out of hearing of our voices. Let's both try together."

They did, and with good effect, so far as the volume of sound was concerned; but that was the only result. There was no answer.

"Why, Violet!" Ruth exclaimed. "This is terrible. What can have happened? What can we do? Do you suppose——?"

She got no further. She was thinking of the references that had been made in the recent discussion of dangers of their situation, to certain savage animals of bloodthirsty fame that roamed the forests. The same thoughts were in Violet's mind, but neither gave utterance to them.

"Where is that berry patch—do you know?" Ruth inquired.

"Yes," Violet answered. "I was close enough to pick a handful in about ten seconds. It's less than a hundred yards from here right straight ahead into the timber."

"You stay here and I'll go to it and find out, if I can, what has happened."

"No, Ruth," Violet objected; "let me go. I know exactly where it is, and there is no danger of my getting lost. You might. I'm not afraid. I'll hurry there and back, for it'll be getting dark before long. Let's hope that I'll find the girls all right and an explanation of why they can't hear us. They may have got down into a hollow or on the other side of a hill or beyond a dense growth of bushes. You know that sound doesn't travel very far even in a fairly open woods."

"That's encouraging, to say the least," Ruth returned. "Well, go ahead and call back to me every few yards and I'll call out to you. When you find my voice getting faint, turn around and come back. Don't let it get very faint either, for you might travel right away from me and lose it entirely while thinking you were coming toward me."

"I'll be careful," was the reassuring promise of the search messenger as she advanced into the forest.

CHAPTER XI.

MASKS AND A BUNDLE.

Arthur Wolf, the driver of the machir which the five girl passengers had been forced to vacate, was really more of a hero than one may suspect in view of his failure to vanquish in a spectacular manner the three armed highwaymen and continue in triumph the journey so impolitely interrupted. If he had attempted something rashly spectacular, his opportunity to prove himself a real hero probably would have been lost.

The fact that his heroism was unsuccessful, in point of immediate benefit to the five girls for whose safety and welfare he felt responsible, did not make it the less heroic. In the beginning, it was a very prosaic sort of heroism, a kind of patient, calculating, bulldog determination, which, fortunately, however, was not fated to be spent without a reward.

Arthur was seventeen years old, just an ordinary, intelligent boy of steady habits. That was the reason Mr. Stevens selected him as driver of the automobile in which his two daughters and their three guests made the trip with Mr. Hazelton and Fred into the great northern woods.

The boy's mind was exercised more with curiosity as to the identity of the three masked highwaymen than concerning the

question of his own personal safety. In fact, the latter question did not bother him at all, for he could not see how his captors could gain anything by doing him any harm so long as he obeyed orders. He did not fear any serious consequences to the unfortunate girls who had been left with a fifteen-mile walk before them four hours before sundown. True, it would be something more than an inconvenience to be forced to remain in the woods all night, but he did not regard the wild-animal menace as more than a thing for children to be afraid of in their sleep. In other words, he shared the popular belief in that part of the country that no wild denizen of the forest would attack a human being unless first molested by the latter.

Arthur's captors said little to him or to one another after they got into the machine. They sat in the back part of the car and gave what few directions there were to be given to the driver; otherwise they kept general silence. Before they got into the automobile, the boy inspected their appearance carefully and decided that if they were not "roughs" of the forest, they were decidedly good imitations of that class of human beings. All of them wore coarse clothes and heavy cow-hide brogans, and their hands were rough and indicated much contact with the raw elements. One of the men wore a heavy untrimmed beard, with a few streaks of gray, and the unmasked parts of the faces of the other two

looked as if they had not been shaved for more than a week.

After they had traveled about a mile, one of the men ordered the boy to stop the automobile, and two of them got out and went into the woods. They were gone about fifteen minutes, and meanwhile Arthur's brain worked very rapidly in a desperate effort to devise some means for outwitting the man who sat behind "covering" him with a (presumably) loaded magazine rifle. But he could think of no scheme which his judgment did not advise him to reconsider, and he was still considering and reconsidering when the two men who had gone into the woods reappeared. One of them carried a bundle which looked as if it might contain anything from a peck of potatoes to a tramp's semiannual laundry.

Arthur wondered very much at this bundle and soon found himself drawing a series of rapid-fire conclusions. First, he decided there must be a cabin or rendezvous of some sort a short distance back in the woods from this point; second, there must be something more or less valuable in the bundle, as viewed by his captors, judging from the almost tender care with which they handled it; third, some new motive must be actuating them now, for they seemed to be in a much greater hurry than before.

"Put on all the speed ye can," ordered the man with the beard. "Get busy with 'er now."

No sojerin', or ye know what's comin' to ye."

Arthur made a great show about speeding up. After cranking the machine and returning to his seat, he put his foot on the accelerator and caused the engine to make all the noise of which it was capable; then he threw in the clutch and the automobile started again.

But he did not let her make full speed. He was certain by this time that the three masked men knew little or nothing about an auto, much less running one. If this surmise were true, and he could get away from them, they would have to abandon the machine.

The drive continued for an hour, without favorable development, although they passed two or three log dwellings or woodmen's huts. These human habitations, however, were set well back from the road, and moreover, the men in the auto were careful to conceal their sinister masks from persons they might encounter along the highway by letting down the mohair sides and buttoning them to the steel standards, thus rendering the automobile a closed car, except in front.

The carefulness with which the highway-men concealed their countenances from their prisoner-chauffeur worked a good deal on the boy's mind, but it was not until they had ridden ten miles or more that Arthur could satisfy himself with an explanation. When the satisfactory explanation did come to him,

however, it startled him so that he almost lost control of his car.

"My gracious!" he told himself; "those are the men who robbed the bank and got away with \$10,000. I bet the money is in that bundle."

CHAPTER XII.

ARTHUR S. TRICK.

"What's the matter, younker?" inquired the man with the beard, giving the driver a gentle dig in the back with the muzzle of his gun. "Be mighty keerful there for I'm an awful good short distance shot. I kin hit ye right in the middle o' the back at a distance of half an inch, an', dead sure, won't miss me aim."

Arthur had no doubt of it and replied with an admission of the veracity of the would-be humorist. He was not quite so particular to tell the truth himself, however. A view he caught at this moment of something far ahead suggested a plausible explanation.

"I just saw something," he answered shortly.

"What did ye see?" asked the bearded man quickly.

"Look and see for yourself—on top of the hill yonder and coming this way."

The three masked men looked and saw an automobile approaching.

"Well," said the bandit spokesman; "that's nothin' to have a fit about. They ain't no load o' peelicemen in it."

"Don't be too sure about it," returned the boy, who now saw an opportunity to play a game which he hoped might place him in a position of better advantage than he enjoyed at

present. "I've got a sort of a suspicion that the Portage police telegraphed somewhere up near the line that a party of bankrobbers were expected up that way and they sent out a load o' gunners to head 'em off."

The panic occasioned by this little speech removed all doubt from Arthur's mind as to the identity of his captors. There was a chorus of maledictions, and one of the men clapped a rough hand on the boy's shoulder and in threatening tones demanded further explanation. The latter began to fear that he had made a mistake in communicating such unwelcome information to the fugitives, so he sought to advance his scheme a little further by taking advantage of their panic.

"Look out there," he said in a voice of mingled warning and anger; don't hit me like that again, unless you want to make me roll this machine over and over down hill. You almost made me do it then."

The man who had clapped his hand roughly on the driver's shoulder calmed down considerably at this rebuke, but repeated his demand no less sternly.

"All I know," Arthur replied with excusable disregard for veracity under the circumstances; "is that I heard them talking about doing that very thing before I left Portage this morning, and I don't mind telling you that I warned you just in the hope you would reward me."

"We'll reward ye by hangin' ye by yer thumbs to a tree ef yo' don't out with all yo' know, an' mighty quick, too," said the man whom the boy had rebuked.

"Keep still, Zeke," ordered the man with the beard. "Let's git all we kin out o' the kid."

"I'm willing to tell you all I know," the boy interposed; "but there isn't much more to it. I came away early and didn't find out what they did. But you haven't anything to fear from me if you'll only divvy the swag."

"Huh?" returned the bearded bank burglar.

"I mean take me in on the game. I'll help you get across the line if you'll do the right thing by me. I won't be a hog either. Give me a couple hundred and I'll be satisfied."

"I wonder if I can put it over," the boy mused "between his words" addressed to the robbers. "Of course they can be arrested in Canada for burglary in the United States even if they get over the line, but maybe that's where they're bound for, thinking it's safer than here."

"Now, the first thing to do," Arthur continued aloud, as if taking for granted that his proposition would be accepted; "is to get out of the sight of that load of policemen, if that's what they are. We'll run this machine in the timber till they go by."

So saying, Arthur turned the automobile into an open space of several acres that ran along the side of a small river which was

bridged with a rough but substantial log affair at this point. In a few minutes he had the machine well hidden from the view of passersby behind a thick growth of alder and sumac.

The men were now sufficiently apprehensive to give heed to the suggestions and well affected caution on the part of the driver they had pressed into service, although they were careful enough to regard him still with considerable suspicion. They were watching him now for evidence as to the real character of his actions, whether for or against them.

But Arthur proved himself exceedingly clever in his application of camouflage. Further evidence of this followed the success of his effort to hold the suspicion of his captors in check while he drove the machine into a place of concealment some distance from the road.

"Don't ye think they seen us before we left the road?" inquired the bank burglar who up to this time had scarcely uttered a word. "They could see us just as good as we seen them."

"But they'll never think of finding you in an automobile," the boy reasoned convincingly, while he congratulated himself on the growing success of his trap for the men's credulity. "And if they should, we'll have a much better opportunity to escape from this place than from the road. But what do you

say to my proposition?—am I to get some of the swag if I help you escape?”

The men chorused a promise, one of them assuring him that he should have \$500 if he got them out of a tight place without a fight.

“The first thing you’d better do is to throw those masks away,” was Arthur’s next shrewd suggestion. “If the cops once get their beads on them, it’ll be all off with the whole gang of us.”

The men were by this time worked up to a conviction that a real and immediate danger confronted them, and they tore off their masks like so many automatons and threw them into the thicket. By this time the rasping gasoline explosions of the approaching auto indicated that it was nearing the point from which Arthur had driven into the timber.

“Now you fellows stick right here and I’ll squint around the bushes and see what they’re doing,” said the boy; and before one of the half-dazed burglars could offer an objection, he was out of sight.

Arthur might have made his escape now with small difficulty if that had been his prime purpose, but he had set his mind on a more daring plan with his own escape as a mere incident. He went only far enough to get a view of the approaching automobile and was astonished to see it stop at the bridge and several men get out.

“Could anything be luckier!” was his “mental exclamation”. “That’s the highway

commissioner and some other county officials inspecting the road and bridges. I must get back at once."

A few moments later he burst into the presence of the three unmasked robbers, who were beginning to feel uneasy because they had permitted him to get out of their sight. His return and the manner in which he spoke won their confidence completely, so that he was able to put his daring scheme into operation without interference.

"Come on," he urged excitedly; "we've got to run for it. They've stopped and got out and are beginning their search. I think they're trying to find where our auto left the road."

The burglars' bundle was still lying in Mr. Stevens' automobile, and Arthur sprang forward and seized it. Then with another "panicky" "come on" he dashed into the thick of the timber, while his three captors, whom he had converted into obedient followers, lumbered along behind.

CHAPTER XIII.

A HIGHWAY CHALLENGE.

Every boy has skill in something that he can do better than anything else. In this respect Arthur was like every other boy, but he went a little farther and proved himself a record specialist, unlike many other boys. He was admittedly the fastest sprinter in Portage among those who professed any speed at all on their feet. On such special occasions as the Fourth of July and the county fair he usually carried off the chief sprinting prizes.

Arthur knew that he could outdistance the three uncouth bank robbers without difficulty if permitted to exercise his speed to its full capability, but his game was not fully played. He was not ready yet to declare himself to his "confederates" and admit as contestants in the race several rifle balls. As he ran, therefore, at the top of his speed through the timber, which was fairly clear of underbrush and bushes, except here and there where the soil seemed richer and better fitted for such vegetation, he turned half around and motioned in seeming desperation for the men to increase their speed.

The latter did the best they were able to do, which was poor enough, compared with Arthur's fleetness of foot. At last the boy reached a much larger and nondescript assort-

ment of bushes and small saplings in a sort of ravine and dashed around it. At this moment he heard the shot of a rifle and knew that the robbers were "onto his game" and were now his pursuers. Then followed another and another shot in rapid succession. The bullets zipped unpleasantly near through the bushes.

Arthur had now no difficulty in "losing" himself from his pursuers. His chief concern was to keep his bearings, for to become lost in the woods at this time was about the worst thing that could happen, aside from being recaptured. Fortunately the thicket around which he ran when he disappeared from the view of the robbers was of considerable extent, so that he was hopeful of being able to make use of it until he could put such distance between him and his hotly chasing enemies that there would be no longer any need of such concealment.

Since the men tore off their masks and he was able to get a full view of their faces, Arthur no longer held them in particular awe, except as to sheer physical dominance. They were not at all sharp or shrewd of appearance. Indeed, under ordinary circumstances, he would have pronounced them dull. He had been not a little surprised at the ease with which he put over his deception preparatory to making his escape with their stolen property, but on reconsideration of the character of their primitive countenances, he decided

that there was no occasion for astonishment.

"What puzzles me most is how those mutts ever got away with such a piece of work as a bank robbery," he mused as he raced through the timber, carrying the robbers' bundle in front of him as a sort of fender against the twigs and bushes in his way. And well he might wonder, being ignorant of the fact that a much sharper and shrewder rascal had engineered the burglary and that these three backwoods renegades had overpowered and robbed him after they had all got away with their rich haul. This explanation developed several days later as a result of the capture of the whole gang, and the confession of one of them.

Arthur swung his course gradually around toward the road after he had run clear of the bushes in the ravine. He wondered if his pursuers were sufficiently skilled in woodcraft to follow his trail, but concluded that even if they were able to do this, no matter how skillfully, the slowness of such an operation would surely be fatal to their purpose.

At last he reached the road and crossed over to the other side and plunged again into the timber. But he kept within view of the highway and made his way back toward the place where he left the automobile. He had not gone far in this direction, however, when it occurred to him that he had better not carry with him any further the supposedly precious, but disreputable looking, bundle: so

he hid it among some huge boulders near the road, made careful note of the surroundings, and continued on his way.

About a mile further he found himself near the log bridge and recognized the bushes behind which he had left the automobile. Cautiously he crossed the road and crept around the bushes, for he felt that there was considerable danger that the robbers had returned and were waiting in ambush for him to come back for the machine. But he decided to take the risk and trust to his heels again to carry him out of harm's way if they should attempt to make trouble for him.

A careful advance to within a few yards of the auto convinced him that he was there ahead of the three robbed robbers. A minute later he was cranking the machine; the engine responded readily, and he got in and soon was backing around to bring the nose of the automobile toward the road.

He had little more than reached the highway when the discharge of a rifle apprized him of the fact that his pursuers had returned and were bent on serious mischief. Then another and another shot were fired, both of them striking the body of the machine, but doing no serious damage. Arthur put on full speed and the auto fairly bounded forward. Several more shots were fired, but they served only to prove that "the men behind the guns" were poor marksmen, and soon auto and driver were practically out of range.

The three bank robbers and highwaymen did not continue the pursuit of the fleeing car after they saw that it was rapidly outdistancing them. They contended themselves with firing their guns at it until either their patience or ammunition gave out, and then they dropped out of the adventure so far as Arthur was concerned. The latter drove rapidly on until he reached the place where he left the bundle of supposed proceeds of the bank robbery, stopped long enough to jump out and snatch it from its place of concealment, and then dashed on.

He was in high spirits now. It was about an hour before sunset. He must drive ten or twelve or fourteen miles over a rough road, up hill and down, in order to overtake the five girls, whom he had been forced, at the points of firearms, to abandon, if they continued their journey toward Portage afoot.

Arthur drove with all the "drive" there was in the machine, considering the character of the road, and he made fairly good progress. In half an hour he was certain he had covered half the distance he had decided he must cover. He tried to get more speed out of the auto, but concluded it was doing the best it was capable of doing under the circumstances. As he neared the road which led to the cabin of the "cruisers" he debated in his mind whether he ought to turn in there and try to find Mr. Hazelton and inform him of what had taken place. Both he and Fred

would at once join in the search for the girls. But the near approach of dusk decided Arthur not to risk the possible consequences of such a delay. It was highly probable that the girls had continued their journey toward Portage afoot, as there was virtually nothing else reasonable for them to do. So the boy drove on as rapidly as was consistent with safety over the little-traveled highway.

Dusk was gathering rapidly when he reached the place where the five girls had built a camp fire as an agent of cheer and protection against troublesome beasts of the forest during the night. The discovery was followed by a thrill of hope that good fortune was about to reward his search. He stopped and gazed eagerly about the place for the girls. But the thrill of hope was quickly succeeded by a chill of disappointment, not unmingled with apprehension. The fire could not have been built by the girls, for it was hardly possible that they had any matches with them. If he had been a Boy Scout, his imagination would not have been so circumscribed.

But what had become of the campers? There was no sign of human habitation in the vicinity. Undoubtedly they had gone into the timber, but they could not be very far away, for the fire was still burning briskly. Perhaps they had seen the girls pass and could give some information regarding them.

Arthur blew the horn of the automobile

loudly and then waited several moments in silence for evidence that he had attracted some one's attention. But no evidence came to his eyes or his ears. Then he blew a dozen more long and loud blasts and looked and listened again. Still no answer. Then he called out a shrill "hello," which, bringing no response, he repeated several times. Presently this proceeding was interrupted in a most startling manner.

A moving of the bushes to the left and a short distance down the road attracted his attention, and he gazed eagerly, expecting to see a human form step out into view. The feeling, far more intense than mere disappointment that went through him, may well be imagined with a mental picture of what he beheld.

The moving object came slowly and cautiously into view, first a large, cat-like head, in which were set two cold and cruel eyes that seemed to challenge a further advance on the part of the noisy intruder, and after the head the lithe, tawny form of a panther.

CHAPTER XIV.

"DR." RUTH.

Meanwhile what had become of the three Camp Fire Girls and their two companions?

Violet reached the patch of wild berries nearly a hundred yards from the edge of the timber without seeing or hearing any evidence of the whereabouts of the missing Marie, Grace, and Iva. She called loudly to them several times, but got no answer. Then she shouted back to her friend at the camp.

"They're not here, Ruth! I'm going to walk around the patch and see if I can't find them."

Ruth was almost panic-stricken and indicated the condition of her mind by the tone of her voice as she called back:

"Don't go too far! Keep calling to me and I'll call to you."

For five minutes this program was followed. If the wild denizens of the forest had been possessed of the most primitive reasoning faculties, they must have listened to these rapidly exchanged signals with feelings of awe.

Then came a longer period of silence at the berry patch than Violet had permitted to elapse since she went into the timber. Ruth called anxiously, but received no reply. She called again, but still no answer.

"Violet, oh, Violet!" she screamed in terror; then suddenly came an answer, the con-

sequent relief and pleasure of which was so great that she almost burst into hysterical laughter.

"I've found them, Ruth!" Violet cried. "They're all right. I'm coming back."

The tones in which this announcement reached Ruth's ears were faint, but distinct, for Violet had penetrated the timber beyond the thick growth of raspberry, blackberry, alder and sumac bushes. After Ruth regained her composure, she continued to call out at intervals in order to guide her friends—she supposed all were returning together—back to the camp.

Violet answered several times, indicating that she was having no difficulty in finding her way. Meanwhile Ruth's panic had given way to a feeling of wonder as to the cause of the berry pickers' failure to respond to the shrill calls she and Violet had sent forth before the latter set out on her search. They must have got lost and wandered deep into the woods, she concluded, and were finding their way back when Violet met them beyond the berry patch.

But imagine her astonishment when Violet appeared at the edge of the timber in company with, not the three lost girls, but with one person, and that an utter stranger. The latter was a woman, and as she came nearer, Ruth felt more and more that she did not like her appearance. She was a typical matron of the backwoods, coarse of manner and dress

and with a cold, suspicious shrewdness in her eye that boded no greater consideration for her own sex than for less delicate men.

However, when she spoke, she manifested a degree of gentleness that one would never have suspected from her appearance, and Ruth felt somewhat reassured.

"Ruth," said Violet; "this is Mrs. Kruttz. She lives back in the timber. She says one of the girls ate something that made her sick and she took them all to her house. She asks us to go there, too, and stay with her until morning."

"Who is ill?" Ruth inquired hurriedly. "What did she eat? Is she very ill?"

"I think it is Iva, from what Mrs. Kruttz tells me," Violet replied.

"She ain't very sick, I guess," the woman added with just a suggestion of sympathy. "She et some p'izen berries, but not 'nough to kill her."

"Let's go right away," said Ruth. "We may be able to do something for her that Grace and Marie haven't thought of."

Mrs. Kruttz led the way to a path through the timber which the girls had not observed in their search for firewood and berries, as it was several hundred feet south of the site they had chosen for their camp. The distance to the cabin was about a quarter of a mile from the road. On account of the obstructions of fallen trees and overhanging limbs,

the walk to the place required about twenty minutes.

Ruth and Violet were not disappointed with the character of the domicile of the uncouth lady of the forest. It was a crude affair of two rooms. The main section was constructed of logs with a long one-pitch roof of large slabs of bark, so laid as, with a careful "breaking of joints", to shed off the rain. To this was added a lean-to almost entirely of bark slabs that had probably been floated down the river, on the left bank of which the cabin stood, from a sawmill somewhere upstream to the west. Three windows of four small panes each admitted light into the main building and the lean-to. Two of these panes had been broken and patched with pieces of greased paper pasted to the glass remnants with some domestic preparation.

The front door, consisting of a double thickness of one-inch boards nailed together with the grains crossing each other at right angles, was swung open, but Marie, Grace, and Iva were not inside. They were in the cleared area near the entrance and were busily occupied as patient and physicians in efforts to overcome the ill effects of the poison berries that Iva had eaten. The latter was seated on a bench consisting of six feet of plank nailed onto two tree stumps, and beside her was Grace supporting her with one arm, while Marie stood by with a small tin pail in one hand and a tin cup in the other.

As they emerged from the timber and beheld this scene, Ruth and Violet broke into a run and in a moment joined the group of three.

"What have you done for her?" Ruth asked.

"This is warm water, which we are using as an emetic," Marie replied.

"Any salt in it?" was Ruth's next question, which she put almost with her next breath.

"No," Marie answered, a little startled at the suggestion of inefficiency on her part. "I clean forgot that."

"Never mind," Ruth continued. "You're forgiven. You know I made a specialty of health craft and won a lot of red honors this year and last, while you specialized on other subjects. So, if you don't mind, I'll take charge of this case."

Then, turning to the woman of the wilderness, she inquired:

"Have you any mustard, Mrs. Kruttz?"

"No, no," the timber hostess replied. "All out."

"Mustard is the best for this purpose," Ruth said in a tone of disappointment; "but I was afraid you wouldn't have any. I suppose you have plenty of salt."

"Yes, lots of it."

The woman hurried inside and soon returned with a cloth bag, which she deposited on the ground near "Dr." Ruth. The latter examined it and found the bag half full of a coarse grade of chloride of sodium. She

“scooped” a handful of the crystal grains into the tinpail of warm water and stirred the mixture with a large metal spoon supplied by Mrs. Kruttz.

In the midst of this proceeding, the girls were electrified by the sound of an automobile “honk, honk, ho-o-nk!” that reached their ears faintly through the timber. This was repeated several times; then followed the sound of a man’s voice, pitched high and loud seemingly to attract someone’s attention.

“I bet that’s Arthur Wolf,” Grace exclaimed eagerly. “He’s escaped from the bank robbers and has come back to find us.”

At the moment, the peculiar look that swept over the countenance of the “hospitable” backwoods lady did not deeply impress the girls, although all of them saw it; but they had occasion to remember it later.

“I’ll go and tell ’im you’re here,” she volunteered. “You all stay here and docktur the young miss. She needs you all”—emphasis on the last word.

“Shan’t I go with you?” Violet inquired.

“No,” replied Mrs. Kruttz with a kind of savage dictation, softened somewhat by a simulated tone of hospitality; “you’ll hinder me. I must go quick to ketch ’im.”

Without more ado, the self-dispatched messenger dashed into the timber, while “Dr.” Ruth and her three assistants devoted their undivided attention to their poisoned patient.

CHAPTER XV.

MRS. KRUTTZ' REPORT.

"Dr." Ruth's method of treating her poison case proved effective. In a few minutes the patient was feeling better, although exhausted. Meanwhile all of the "staff"—"physician" and "attendants"—took off their sport coats and arranged them for a couch, pillow and cover upon the ground, and soon Iva was "in bed."

The success of the treatment perhaps was best indicated by jocular remarks uttered by the patient soon after she was comfortably "tucked in."

"I feel giddy, girls," she said; "and I am going to spring a joke."

"Doctor" and "nurses" were apprehensive of serious consequences on hearing this announcement. Iva's mind must be wandering. A joke under such circumstances could hardly be anything but grewsome.

"Your poisoned Iva (ivy) came near being berried (buried), didn't she?" continued the "grewsome joker."

Everybody gasped, then laughed with astonishment. Iva's humor proved to be the very tonic that all needed.

"You'll be as well as ever by tomorrow morning," "Dr." Ruth declared with ecstatic delight. "No very sick person could joke like

that. Why, Shakespeare never made a better pun than that. It's what I call a frontier classic."

"It's hard to realize that we are in such a predicament," said Violet. "Really, on the moment, I almost forgot we were practically lost in the great Maine woods."

"If we could blot out some of our experiences of the day, I might even imagine we were just on a long hike," Grace declared.

"Instead of an emergency hike," Marie supplemented.

"How did you girls happen to find this place?" Ruth inquired, addressing the three late berry-pickers.

"We didn't find it," Marie explained. "After Iva—Goodness! did you hear that?"

Yes, everybody heard it—the discharge of a gun, seemingly at about the place from which the sound of the "honking" of the automobile horn and the shouting of a human voice had proceeded before Mrs. Kruttz set out to investigate.

"It's getting too late for us to go and see who that is," Violet remarked. "It would be dark before we got back."

"Yes, we'll have to stay here and wait for the mistress of this mansion to get back," said Grace.

"Do you suppose that was Arthur Wolf who fired that shot to notify us he was hunting for us?" Iva asked in a weak voice. "If it was Arthur, he must have found the fire we built

and reasoned that we must not be very far away. After he got no reply to the auto horn and to his own calls, he may have decided to try the gun."

"That sounds logical," Ruth returned thoughtfully. "And, do you know, girls, we have been a regular set of dummies—ninnies? Why didn't we call out in answer to his calls?"

Every member of the group looked disgusted at this exasperating query.

"Why in the name of common sense didn't we?" Violet exclaimed. "Why, it never once occurred to me."

"We were busy doctoring Iva, and Mrs. Kruttz went to meet him for us—that's the whole thing in a nutshell," Marie explained.

"Well, now that we've thought of it, let's not delay any longer," said Ruth. "Mrs. Kruttz may miss him."

Without further ado, Ruth began to "yoo-hoo" at the top of her voice, and the other girls, catching the "key," joined in to give volume to the call. Then they were silent for a few moments and listened intently. There was no answer. They called again and listened, and repeated this proceeding several times, but received no response. When finally they ceased their shouts, they were more despondent than they had been just before Iva cheered them up with a grewsome but reassuring, "double-jointed" pun.

Giving it up as a fruitless endeavor, the girls returned to their discussion of the meeting of the berry-pickers and Mrs. Kruttz.

"Iva began to get sick after eating those berries, and we didn't know what to do," said Grace. "We had about decided to try to get her back to the campfire, when Mrs. Kruttz appeared with a pail to gather some berries. We told her what was the matter and asked her if we might not take Iva to her house and do something for her there. The woman said we might, and we went, half carrying Iva most of the way."

"Didn't you hear us shouting to you?" asked Ruth.

"Yes, it seems to me that I heard you," Marie answered; "but I didn't pay any attention to your calls, I suppose, because I was too much concerned about Iva. But finally we sent Mrs. Kruttz to bring you to us."

It was now almost dark, and the girls were beginning to get a little nervous because of the extended absence of the uncouth mistress of the premises. But this uneasiness was not given much further time to grow, for presently Mrs. Kruttz appeared at the edge of the clearing and advanced toward them.

"Who was it? Where is he?" Ruth inquired eagerly, yet with a premonition of disappointment.

"I don't know," the woman replied. "He shot a painter, an' then run away. Guess he was afeered they wuz more aroun'."

CHAPTER XVI.

MYSTERIOUS MRS. K.

"What next?" exclaimed Violet.

It was a question, but was not put for an answer. No reply would have been given much consideration, for the manner in which the query was put indicated that a solution of the puzzle as to what the near future was to bring forth was beyond human conjecture.

But, strange to say, there was no sign of panic among the girls. Or, was it strange, after all? The answer may be yes or no, as you please. Argument for a negative might be thus:

The girls were reunited after a most distressing experience. Fear of fatal result from the eating of poison berries by Iva was dispelled. She had eaten only a few of the dangerous "white currants," as they had appeared to her, and, thanks to the labors of her Camp Fire friends, the substance of that menace to her health had been removed. Moreover, the dreaded danger from wild animals, confirmed by the timber woman's report of the shooting of a "painter," had been obviated, for the night at least, by the finding of a place of refuge.

And so, all things considered, the girls felt that they were in a position to congratulate

themselves, although not disposed to continue the jocularity started by Iva's humorous remark. Their conversation, therefore, was, in the main, of a well composed, serious character.

Mrs. Kruttz "explained" that the man who shot the panther rode away immediately after the shooting and that she was unable to attract his attention by calling out to him.

"Didn't he hear our calls?" Ruth asked.

"I guess not," she answered. "I couldn't hardly hear you. I s'pose he must a' been excited by meetin' a painter out there all alone."

"Wasn't it a boy, not a man?" Ruth inquired, looking keenly at the woman.

"Oh, no, no!" the latter replied hastily. "He was a man—big, heavy man, had whiskers."

"What do you suppose he was making all that noise for?" Violet asked.

"I donno," she answered, almost sullenly, it seemed, as if angry because she could not think of a plausible explanation. "Mebby he wanted somebody to come an' help 'im kill the painter."

This construction of the man's purpose seemed so lame and "uncommon-sensible" that suspicion was aroused at once in the minds of the girls that she had not made a truthful report of her investigation to them.

"We were expecting a boy about 17 years old to come along this way and take us home," said Grace. "We thought that must be the boy we were expecting, and that he was signaling for us."

"No, no!" declared Mrs. Kruttz with more positiveness in her voice than the occasion seemed to require. It wasn't him, not him. Mebby he'll come yet. We'll lissen."

The fact of the matter was that the cunning woman had had an interview with Arthur and so misinformed him that he decided to make no further investigation, and drove on. The panther which interrupted his efforts to attract the attention of the builders of the fire did not advance toward him, but, having satisfied his curiosity by staring for a minute or two at the boy in the auto, turned suddenly and leaped back into the thicket and disappeared from view. Arthur, meanwhile, stared at the beast quite as fixedly as the brute stared at him, debating whether or not it was wiser to reach behind the driver's seat for his rifle or fight a battle of staring eyes. He was still debating this question when it was answered in favor of the "eye contest" by the sudden departure of the out-stared animal.

The boy now decided to light the lamps of the machine, and he got out for this purpose, taking his rifle with him. The acetylene burners sputtered a good deal and it took him considerable time to make them burn satisfactorily, but finally this task was finished and he returned to his seat, intending to "honk" his horn again in the hope of attracting the attention of the persons who had built the fire.

As he sat down and looked ahead of the automobile, he was startled into a deeper sense

of the danger before him by seeing either the same panther or another very similar in appearance standing in the middle of the road not more than fifty feet away, his eyes glistening in the light of the acetylene lamps.

Quick as a flash, Arthur brought his gun to his shoulder and fired. The ball struck the animal in the left eye and he fell over. As the skilled marksman got out again, this time to inspect his quarry, he muttered:

"That gives me an idea. Perhaps if I fire the rifle several times in succession I'll get an answer from somebody in the vicinity."

The beast was stone dead, and Arthur moved the carcass to one side of the road, saying as he returned again to the machine:

"It's too bad I didn't kill him at some other time of the year than the middle of the summer—his hide might be worth taking."

He listened for a few moments for indication that his rifle shot had been heard by someone, but, receiving none, he was about to discharge the gun again when he saw the form of a woman come out of the timber on the right and approach him.

"How do you do, lady?" the boy said eagerly. "Do you live near here?"

"Yep," replied Mrs. Kruttz with a snap of her voice. "Back in the woods."

"Did you build that fire?"

"Nope. Some gals built it."

The boy's hopes leaped high.

"Where are they now?" he asked.

"About an hour's ride ahead o' you'. Another au'mobile come along an' they tole the man in it they wuz lost, an' he said, 'Pile in, an' I'll turn aroun' an' take yo' back home.' So they piled in, an' he turned aroun', an' they rode away, an' I ain't saw 'em since."

"How many girls were there?"

"Five. Who be they?"

"One of them is a daughter of a Boston lawyer who came here to buy a lot of this timberland for a big lumber company," Arthur replied. "The others are friends of hers, two living in Portage, one in Brooklyn, and one in Newark, N. J."

"You say he's goin' to buy a lot of this land?" the woman inquired eagerly. "Seems to me I heern sompin' about that. What he goin' to do with it?"

"The company's going to cut down the timber for lumber," said Arthur.

The woman's eyes seemed to flash dangerously; then they appeared to grow sullen.

"Well, yo'll find them gals on ahead o' yo' ten miles or more. Ye've got to travel mighty fast or they'll git to Portage ahead o' yo'."

"Thank you ever so much, lady," said Arthur earnestly. "I'm so glad they're safe. It wouldn't do any good for them to be out all night with such animals as that (indicating the carcass beside the road) prowling around. Aren't you afraid of them?"

"They'll never tech me in the daytime," the woman replied; "an' I doan go out at night.

If they did tech me, they'd have a tougher time than they reckoned."

As she spoke, the woman drew from a belt, concealed by her overhanging blouse-waist, an ugly looking pistol and a long sheath-knife.

"I live ready fer anything," she said.

"So I perceive," Arthur said in a tone of respect that he had not felt before. "Allow me to congratulate you. But what is that noise? It sounds like someone calling somebody."

"That's my two darters hollerin' fer me to hurry home. They're afraid to have me alone in the woods after dark."

"Well, thank you ever so much," said Arthur as he drove away. "You've taken a big load off my mind."

The woman muttered an answering good-bye and turned back into the timber, gleefully chuckling over the sharp trick she had played on this friend of her five girl prisoners, for that was the light in which she regarded them.

CHAPTER XVII.

PECULIAR ACTIONS.

Preparation of supper at the Kruttz cabin on that memorable evening was a novel task to the five girl guests. The latter, Iva excepted, assumed the politic role of volunteer kitchen-maids, assuring their hostess that they stood ready to take every burden off her hands in order that they might be as little trouble to her as possible.

Mrs. Kruttz lighted a wall-lamp in the large living room, which served also as dining room, bedroom and clothes closet. The lean-to proved to be the kitchen and general storeroom. A stove with a removable sheet iron oven stood at the side where the roof came nearest the ground. Another wall-lamp furnished light for this apartment.

In the main room were a pine table with hinge leaves, a bed, and a bureau which looked as if they might have seen Revolutionary days, and three straight-backed chairs and a rocking-chair. As Mrs. Kruttz led the way into the house, she said:

"Sorry I ain't got 'nuff cheers fer ye all, but yo' kin set on the bed or anything yo' kin find."

"That's all right, Mrs. Kruttz," said Ruth reassuringly. "I'm sure you are more inconvenienced than we are. Now, you just sit down and give orders, and we'll do all the work

there is to do. We don't want to make you any more trouble than is absolutely necessary."

"I put supper off till late 'cause I kinda thought my ole man 'u'd be home about this time," the woman said. So we'll git 'nuff supper fer him an' all o' us."

This was the first reference Mrs. Kruttz had made to the fact that she had a husband. The girls had felt some curiosity regarding the entire personnel of the household, but waited patiently for voluntary information on the subject.

Iva, although able to walk about without assistance, was still rather faint and weak; so she sat down in the rocking-chair, while the other girls began to get supper. Violet built a fire in the kitchen stove, while Marie peeled potatoes and Grace sliced some smoked ham, of which there was a plentiful supply. Meanwhile Ruth and Mrs. Kruttz went to the spring-house at the foot of a hill near by and brought back some milk and butter. The existence of these dairy products resulted in the disclosure of the fact that Mr. and Mrs. Kruttz kept a cow, also a horse, chickens, and several hogs, and that they cultivated two or three acres of cleared ground a short distance from the house.

The offer of the girls to get supper if their hostess would sit down and take things easy astonished Mrs. Kruttz, although she did not express her wonder in words. The idea that any member of such delicate. **fair** skinned

richly dressed (from her point of view) "city girls" could do anything except fall all over themselves in a kitchen seemed to her preposterous. But when she saw them go at things with the skill of cooking-school graduates she had great difficulty in keeping her thoughts to herself; however, her astonishment did not tend to soften her attitude toward her guests.

The latter would not have gone about their task of preparing supper with the degree of confidence and assurance that characterized their actions if they had had a suspicion of what was going on in the mind of their hostess. The subject that interested her most was that of money. How much, if any, did they have with them? Could she get possession of their money and valuables and at the same time turn the suspicion of the theft away from herself?

Mrs. Kruttz's cupidity was aroused first by the sight of the gold wrist-watch worn by Marie when she met the latter and the Stevens sisters near the berry patch. On learning that there were five in this party of apparently wealthy girls and that they were confronted with the necessity of spending the night in the woods, while one of them was threatened with a serious illness, her avaricious wits began to work with good speed. Later, when she beheld also the wrist-watches of Ruth and Violet and other articles of jewelry, including certain gold emblems and badges worn by the

three Camp Fire girls, she decided that if she did not make a good "haul" out of them there was nobody but herself to blame.

So Mrs. Kruttz maintained an attitude of hospitality, by means of which she hoped to keep the girls in a state of confidence, but it resulted only in disappointment for her; for, in a spirit of gratefulness and generosity, one of her guests "broke her heart" by announcing that they were without means even to pay for a night's lodging.

"We want to make this right with you, Mrs. Kruttz," Grace said as she was setting the table with a nondescript variety of age-cracked "china" and tinware. "Of course, we didn't bring any money with us, but we will see that you are well repaid for these accommodations. My father is well known in this part of the country, and he will be sure to see that you are well repaid."

Ruth entered the room from the kitchen as Grace was making her promise of recompense to Mrs. Kruttz, and she caught the sudden look of dangerous disappointment in the woman's face. She pretended not to notice this expression, but nevertheless resolved to keep her "secret eye" on the countenance of their hostess.

A few minutes later the woman arose from her seat, where inaction seemed to make her uncomfortable, and took a lantern from a hook on the wall and lighted it.

"I'm goin' out to the barn an' see 'at iv'ry-thing's all right," she said. "I'll be back in ten er fifteen minutes."

"Aren't you afraid to go out after dark?" Ruth inquired, regarding the forest woman narrowly.

"I ain't afeered o' nothin'," the latter answered, startling the girls by lifting her blouse waist and exposing a pistol and a sheathed knife in a wide leather belt. "All the painters an' wolves know me by repytation an' keep their distance."

"Do panthers and wolves hang around this place?" asked Marie.

"They get purty femilyer sometimes," answered Mrs. Kruttz; "but I don't let 'em hinder me when I go out."

"Wasn't that the howling of a wolf I heard a minute ago?" inquired Ruth.

"Yes, that's one o' them critters, but they don't make much trouble this time o' the year. In the winter they git purty hungry an' might be dangerous if yo' met a pack of 'em out alone."

Without further ceremony, Mrs. Kruttz opened the door and went out into the darkness, carrying the lantern with her. After she had closed the entrance, Ruth went cautiously to the door, opened it and peered out.

"I just wanted to make sure that she didn't stop when she got outside and then listen to what we say," she announced, turning to her companions. "Girls, I don't like the actions of

that woman. There's something peculiar about this place and the people who live here. I don't believe she's bound for the barn at all. Didn't you notice how uneasy she seemed to be? I'm going to follow her and find out, if I can, what's on her mind."

CHAPTER XVIII.

MRS. K. AND A LANTERN

"No, no! Don't you do that, Ruth," Violet protested in alarm. "You stay right in here. "It would be the height of folly for any of us to venture out in the woods after dark. I'm surprised at your suggesting such a thing."

"Violet is right," said Marie just as urgently. "Have you forgotten about the panther that was killed near here just a little while ago?"

"I have my doubts on that subject," Ruth answered. "I tell you, girls, I am afraid we are not in a much better place than out among the wild beasts. I've been watching that woman, and I'm as sure as I can be that her attitude toward us is not friendly."

"I've been afraid of something of the kind myself," said Grace nervously; "and when I saw that pistol and knife in her belt I was sure there was something wrong somewhere."

"Don't you know we have a sick girl here, and we ought to be careful not to frighten her?" Marie warned.

"Don't keep any secrets from me just because you're afraid I'll collapse," Iva spoke up quickly. "I'm not going to be sick very long. Danger is just the thing that will make me forget I am sick."

"There ought not to be much danger of a panic here after such a speech as that from a

poisoned patient, the youngest of us all," Violet declared. "I'm going to wait for something headed directly for me before I get scared."

"If you do that, you'll be sure to dodge it," Ruth observed grimly.

"We're talking like real soldiers," said Marie with speculative emphasis. "I hope we act like soldiers if our fears prove to be well founded."

She was standing near the south window, and her last word of warning had scarcely left her lips when she exclaimed excitedly:

"Girls, come here! It begins to look as if Ruth were right, that Mrs. Kruttz didn't leave the house to go to the barn."

In a moment all, including Iva, were close to the uncurtained window and gazing out through the trees to a spot where the light of the timber woman's lantern could be seen.

"I've been watching her ever since she left the house," Marie said with rapid utterance; "and I'm sure there's someone out there with her. Look carefully and see if you can't see two persons near the light. You can tell them from the trees only when they move."

The lantern was some distance beyond the nearest trees, so that the task put by Marie to her companions was a difficult one. But in a few minutes all were convinced that Marie's vision was not in error. Every one of the girls declared she was certain that she could make out two persons near the light.

"They're discussing something very earnestly, and Mrs. Kruttz evidently has forgotten all about us," said Marie. "She forgot there was a window on this side of the house and that we could see the light through the trees."

"I wish we were near enough to hear what they are saying," said Ruth eagerly. "I'm pretty sure it would interest us a whole lot."

"You stay right here," Violet ordered. "This is the safest place for all of us. There's no telling what would happen if they should catch one of us listening to their conversation."

"What makes you think she didn't tell the truth when she said that a man shot a panther over at the road?" Iva inquired, addressing Ruth.

"Because I believe that was Arthur Wolf who blew the automobile horn and shouted, and that he was trying to find us. I believe, too, that he fired his gun for the same purpose."

"But why shouldn't Mrs. Kruttz have told us the truth?"

"Because she wanted us here, for some reason, and that reason I believe I could find out if I could overhear that conversation."

"Do you think she wants to rob us?" asked Violet.

"She wouldn't get much," Marie declared with an uneasy laugh. "I'd be willing to give her every bit of jewelry I have on me to get out of this place and back to Portage."

"Let's tell her that, if you really think she wants to rob us," Violet suggested. "We don't need to let on that we suspect her. We can tell her that we'll leave all our jewelry, such as it is, as a guarantee that we will pay her well for our night's lodging."

"That isn't a bad idea," said Ruth. "I say that because I really am afraid she is up to something dishonest. If you'd seen the look on her face that I saw when Grace told her that we had no money with us, I'm sure you'd think the same as I do."

"I saw it, and I quite agree with you, Ruth," Iva announced. "She is a dangerous woman, in my opinion."

"Suppose that person out there with her should prove to be her husband, and they should come in together—wouldn't that change your mind a little?" suggested Grace a little more hopefully.

"It would make things look a little better," Ruth answered slowly. "Still, I'd want to be on my guard. I hope it is her husband and he'll come in with her and prove to have a more reputable appearance than she has."

"She's coming," announced Marie, who had kept her gaze directed toward the objects of interest. "See—the lantern is moving this way."

The girls watched the light until it reached the clearing around the cabin. Then they could see Mrs. Kruttz advance toward the entrance.

"She's alone," said Ruth gravely; but the others could see this just as well as she.

CHAPTER XIX.

PRECAUTIONS.

"My ole man ain't here yet," muttered Mrs. Kruttz in a tone of seeming disappointment after she had re-entered the hut and looked around as if expecting to find her husband there. "Well," she added; "I don't s'pose he'll be here tonight, so we'll go ahead an' have supper."

Little remained to be done in the preparation of the meal except transferring the meat and potatoes from the stove to the table, and soon the hungry girls were enjoying a substantial, if not sumptuous, repast. The table was moved close to the bed so that three of the girls—Grace, Marie and Ruth—might use it for a seat, and the others occupied the three dining-room chairs.

Mrs. Kruttz had little to say during the meal, seeming to be preoccupied with something that absorbed most of her interest.

After supper the guests cleared off the table and washed the dishes. Meanwhile Ruth, in a few short whispered conversations, communicated to her friends a plan she had been studying over to meet the difficult situation which they felt confronted them, and when all the work of the evening was finished she proceeded to put it into operation. She began by addressing their hostess thus:

"Mrs. Kruttz, this is a very lonely spot, and

there's no telling what might happen over night if some bad men should discover that five girls wearing jewelry were stopping here. We don't feel safe with any valuables in our possession, and we want you to keep them for us. Can't you hide them somewhere until morning?"

Probably nothing in this woman's experience for a good many days, if not years, had astonished her quite as much as this proposition. She had been shrewd enough to see that her emergency guests were suspicious of her, and her keen eyes had detected several short whispered conversations evidently not intended for her observation. Ruth noticed that she was hesitating in an effort to frame a reply to her suggestion.

"We believe that is the best way to insure safe keeping of our watches and rings," Ruth added, hoping to be able to swing the hard-featured woman into co-operation with their plan before a stubborn impulse could get control of her and make her unmanageable. "Besides, we think you are entitled to a guarantee that we will pay you for tonight's accommodations. We want you to keep our watches and rings until we come back or send someone else back to pay what we owe you."

There was really nothing for Mrs. Kruttz to do but accept this proposition, and she did so with enough grace to reassure herself, but not to deceive her guests. Then the girls proceeded to strip their wrist-watches, bracelets

and finger-rings from their arms and hands and deposit them on the table. The woman seemed unable to keep her eyes off of this aggregation of treasure. Her effort to disguise her eagerness was as evident as its failure. She was a woman of intense, masculine emotions; and, cunning schemer though she was, it would have been little short of miraculous for her suddenly to master habit and look from her eyes what she did not think.

Mrs. Kruttz spread out a large red handkerchief on the table, put the watches and jewelry on it, brought the four corners together and tied them into a knot. Then she said:

"I'll put them under my piller, an' my barker close beside, an' any man what tries to take 'em 'll croak with an awful noise 'splodin' in 'is ears."

"How will we arrange for sleeping?" Grace inquired.

"I'll sleep in the kitchen, an' yo' all make the best yo' kin o' this room," the hostess said a little more graciously than she had spoken since her return into the hut.

"No, no, that wouldn't be fair to you, Mrs. Kruttz," Ruth objected. "You sleep in your bed and we'll make up some kind of sleeping place for each of us on the floor."

But the woman of strange attitudes would not listen to this proposal. Her insistence seemed to have more of the character of generosity than any of her other attempts to make a favorable impression.

"No," she said. "Yo' all'll have this room to yerselves, an' I'll make a bed in the kitchen."

There was no mistaking the fact that she preferred this arrangement, whatever her motive; so the girls made no further effort to dissuade her. She produced several blankets and comfortables of considerable age and wear and not the most commendable as to cleanliness; also a surprisingly large assortment of overcoats, cloaks and other men's and women's wear, and instructed the girls to arrange them on the floor to produce the best possible substitute for a mattress and springs. In a few minutes the ingenuity of the girls had contrived three "better-than-none" sleeping places on the floor, and Violet announced that the guests were ready to "retire."

Without so much as saying "good-night," Mrs. Kruttz picked up her little "bundle of treasure," strode into the kitchen and closed the door. A few minutes later Iva and Marie were lying on the bed and the three other girls were reclining on their rudely improvised floor-cots, striving vainly, in spite of their physical weariness, to go to sleep.

CHAPTER XX.

HATPIN SUBSTITUTES

It was hardly to be expected that the five girls, stranded under strange and puzzling circumstances in the great northern woods, should be able to lose themselves in slumber at the proverbial "moment their heads touched the pillow." And the substance of the "pillows" of the three girls on the floor, consisting of anything in the way of a garment or two compactly folded to serve as a headrest, and the similarly improvised "mattresses" was by no means the chief cause of their restlessness. Marie and Iva found just as much difficulty in their efforts to go to sleep on the bed, which, though far from being an ideal couch, was a distinct improvement over the floor affairs.

Having disposed of their valuables for the night, if not forever, as suggested by Violet in a whispered conversation with Ruth, they believed they had disposed of the dreaded danger of a robbery in the night, but there was still enough uncertainty regarding the near future to keep their nerves on edge. Although few words were exchanged among them for fifteen or twenty minutes after they "retired," all were instinctively conscious of the fact that there was small hope of much sleep for any of them for several hours, if not the entire night.

For several minutes after the light had been put out and Mrs. Kruttz had closed the door communicating between the two rooms the girls could hear their hostess moving about in the kitchen, supposedly preparing a sleeping place for herself. Then all was stillness, save for the gentle breathing of the occupants of the larger room, the heavy snoring of the sleeper in the kitchen and the occasional call of some near or distant denizen of the woods.

Ruth, of all the five lodgers in this hut of mystery, was perhaps the least content with the situation. From the time when she lay down close to Violet and Grace, and comparative quiet reigned over that secluded retreat in the vast Maine forest, her mind reviewed the rapidly succeeding events of the day and evening just ended, and she could hope for little in store for her and her companions during the next seven or eight hours but a night of alarms and wakefulness.

She felt a deep sense of responsibility for their predicament resting on her. It was she who had extended invitations to Violet and Marie to accompany her on this excursion into northern Maine, and the trip into the woods with Grace and Iva as additional companions was but a natural consequence. If anything should happen to prevent the safe return of any of the four girls with her, Ruth was certain that she would never be able to throw off the resulting mental depression that would be hers.

If any physical danger should threaten them from any source whatsoever in the course of the night, they would be utterly unable to meet it under present conditions. Ruth wondered if there were not some way in which they might contrive self-protection against attack or annoyance from any malicious source. She disliked very much to entertain the idea of such possibility, but intuition warned her not to dismiss it without due consideration.

As she studied over this problem, she gazed out of the window near which she was lying. The atmosphere was clear, and as the eaves of the roof extended only a few inches over the side of the house, she had a view of a considerable patch of moonlit sky. She turned her gaze about the room and observed that it was not so dark as it had seemed to her immediately after putting out the light. She could see, indistinctly, it is true, every object of much size within the four walls.

Her gaze fell upon the dim outlines of the table near the east wall. Upon it were the dishes and other utensils they had used at supper. A few moments later she was thinking hard over a suggestion that came to her with startling suddenness. It was audacious, and at first seemed rather foolish, but the more she considered it the more it recommended itself to her. She put her lips close to the ear of Violet, who was lying nearest her, and whispered:

"Listen, Violet; I've got an idea. We ought

not to be without protection entirely. I'm going to get each of us a weapon of defense."

Without waiting for a reply, she arose and stole softly to the table and, after feeling about cautiously for a minute or two, returned with several sharp-pronged steel table-forks in her hand. Leaning over Violet, she whispered again to her thus:

"Here is a fork. Put it where you can get it if there should be any trouble. I really don't think there'll be any, but it's best to be prepared. Keep your head and don't do anything rash, or you might hurt your friends instead of your enemies. Use it only in case of absolute necessity. It will serve as a good substitute for a hatpin--woman's weapon, you know."

Ruth had a faculty of relieving tension with light remarks, and this hatpin suggestion was intended, and served well, for that purpose. She visited the other girls with a like whispered speech and left with each of them a similar weapon; then returned to her sleeping place, keeping a fork for herself.

She felt more confident of the outlook now, not because she had made the "fortress" impregnable, but because she had done something which seemed worth while, representing her best effort. Five or ten minutes later she was asleep.

What time it was when she awoke she had no way of telling, nor could she determine what it was that awakened her. She listened

instinctively, and pretty soon she realized that it was well that she had been aroused from her sleep, whatever the cause. The snoring of the woman in the next room had ceased, nor was she slumbering in silence. Apparently she was awake and engaged in conversation with someone, for the sound of voices reached the listener's ear through the slab partition, and one of them was the voice of a man.

CHAPTER XXI.

RUTH LISTENS.

Ruth listened quietly for a minute or two, concentrating her attention to the best of her ability, in the hope that she might catch some of the words being uttered in the next room, but her efforts were in vain. Then she turned to the girl nearest her and whispered:

"Are you asleep, Violet?"

"No," came back the answer, as the speaker turned slightly toward her questioner.

"How long have you been awake?" Ruth asked.

"Five or ten minutes," Violet replied.

"Listening?"

"Yes."

"Have you heard anything?"

"Nothing very plain. I think I heard a man's voice. Someone came in through the kitchen entrance and a discussion has been going on ever since."

"I'm going to find out what it is if I can," Ruth declared.

She arose and moved quietly toward the door between the two rooms. The rising moon had made the interior of the cabin much lighter than when she fell asleep, so that she was able to make her way across the floor with small difficulty. Arrived at the door, she put her head close to it and listened attentively.

Yes, the conversation in the next room was much more distinct now; she could understand almost every word, and the first sentence rewarded her efforts. The speaker was Mrs. Kruttz and her utterance, subdued as much as her intense feeling would permit, was as follows:

"I tell you I've got iv'rything o' theirs what's any good 'cept their clo'es. The's no good o' startin' inything what won't git yo' inything."

The answer came in the heavy hoarse voice of a man, who also had difficulty, for similar reason, in subduing his tones.

"Thin I'll rob you an' you tell them a burglar broke in an' tuck their things," he said. "I'll choke you, you scream, I'll grab the bag an' run, an' you fire yer gun." -

"Yo're a fool, Jule," the woman returned angrily. "That won't git us one cent more'n we'd git by doin' my way. Leave it to me, and I'll git some real money outen 'em and they won't be iny risk to it."

"But you say they ain't got none."

"They'll git it, or I'll keep the jew'iry—see? That's the agreement. Any man's a fool to steal sompin' what he kin git w'thout stealin'."

With these words, Mrs. Kruttz uttered a great truth, although she had no such great purpose in mind. If she had had a bigger idea of her ability to "git w'thout stealin'," honesty would have been to her something more than an element of crafty design.

The man, whom Ruth suspected, correctly, to be Mr. Kruttz, made no reply to his wife's ruling on the matter before them. Apparently he was intelligent enough to catch the common sense of his wife's argument, for he insisted no further on his original proposition. During the next few minutes there was no further conversation in the next room, or if there was any exchange of words, it was in tones so low that they did not reach the listening ears of Ruth. She was beginning to think that there would be nothing further for her to overhear, when the voice of the man on the other side of the partition spoke up thus, with seemingly no effort to soften his natural tone:

"Well, where be I goin' to sleep tonight, with them swell visiturs o' your'n occypyin' the bed?"

"Ye kin sleep out here jest ez good ez me," Mrs. Kruttz replied. Then she added, lowering her voice: "It don' seem to me 'at ye deserve inything better arter lettin' them four g'loots git the best o' ye. We might 'a been rich now ef yo' 'd 'a' kep' yer wits about ye."

"Shet up, Lyze," the man growled. "Didn't I tell ye they jumped onto my back an' laid me clean out 'afore I c'uld say my prayers? But, b'lieve me, they'll feel like sayin' thein whin I git hold of 'em. Et wuz ten thousan' dollars ef et wuz a cent, an' slipped out o' my

fingers just like that" (snapping one of the digits referred to).

"Where did they go to?" Mrs. Kruttz inquired.

"I don' know. They wuz talkin' about makin' tracks fer Canyda afore they jumped onto me. They wanted to hold up some feller with an autymobile an' make 'im take us acrosst the line 'cause they wuz too lazy to hoof it. I tole 'em they wuz fools an' that wuz jus' the very way to git caught—"

Mrs. Kruttz interrupted her husband in such excitement at this point that Violet, who was lying awake in the middle of the room, distinctly heard her say:

"I bet inything et wuz them trechyrus pals o' your'n what held up the autymobile them gals wuz a-ridin' in an' tuck et away from 'em."

By this time Ruth had heard enough to cause her to decide that it was her duty to an entire community to hear as much more as possible. Something of the same idea took possession of Violet, and a moment or two later she was standing beside her friend and listening just as intently as the latter.

CHAPTER XXII.

GONE!

The conversation on the other side of the partition continued without interruption or delay.

"What, yo' mean them gals in there?" the man inquired.

"Them very gals, nobody else," the woman returned.

"They wuz in an autymoble, an' et wuz tuck away from 'em?"

"That's what they said."

"Who tuck et?"

"Four men."

"Them men with me couldn't drive an autymoble, none of 'em."

"They wuz a feller in et, a boy, an' they made 'im drive."

"Which way?"

"Up north."

"They're bound fer Canyda, dead fer sure. They're afreed o' me more'n the perlice. They want to git ez fur away from me ez they kin, 'cause they know I'll go a long ways to git back at 'em. I wuz to git most o' that haul 'cause I done the real work while they watched out fer inybody a-comin'."

"I got somep'n more to tell ye 'at yo' mebbe'll be glad to hear," said Mrs. Kruttz at this juncture by way of changing the subject.

"What's that?" her husband asked.

"Them gals in the next room is some way connected with the rich guy 'at's buying of all these woods to cut 'em down."

"Eh!"

This exclamation was the loudest utterance that had escaped from the lips of either the man or the woman in the course of the conversation overheard by Ruth.

"I tell ye they is," Mrs. Kruttz continued with an expression of feeling that sounded almost savage. "They said so. They come up in the woods with a man what's come from Bosting, or New Yark, or some big city, to see the cruisers what's been a-countin' of the trees. The gals sez he's 'tendin' to start cuttin' trees next winter."

Kruttz gave expression to his reception of this announcement with a coarse burst of rage.

"I've got to see Keever tomorrer sure. I mus' start out early."

"What yo' goin to do?" Jule.

"I donno. 'Pends on him. He's the boss o' the works roun' here."

"Goin' to start the fire?"

"Mebby. Looks like et's about time."

"Et'll be some bully big blaze."

"Won't et though!"

"Wher'll ye start et?"

"Right in the middle some'eres; sev'ral places."

"Won't them cruisers put et out?"

"Et'll be too fur gone to stop whin they see et. They'll be asleep when we start et. An' ef they do git et checked, we'll come along with a lot o' blazes on all sides fer self-perfection—see? We'll smoke 'em clean out o' the state. They won't be iny more trees fer to cut, an' we'll have this hull country t' arsel'es fer a good many y'ars."

"But et won't be much good fer huntin' ef yo' burn down all the trees, will et?" Mrs. Kruttz suggested.

"Et'll be jus' ez good next y'ar ez this," her husband replied. "The bushes'll grow jus' ez thick' an' that's where the game hides, and the fishin' won't be hurt a bit."

"But ef ye start a lot o' fires on the outside an' burn in toward the middle, yo'll trap all the game an' burn 'em up."

"Yes, we'll kill a lot that way, but a lot more'll git out, an' a lot more'll come in next y'ar. But we've got to do et, 'cause them tree cutters'll crowd us all out o' the woods when they git to cuttin' logs; or ef they don' crowd us out the game wardens'll git a sight more busy. They're altergether too sassy now to suit a lot uv us. We've got to do them er they'll do us. My notion is ef we burn these woods over oncet, they'll stay to hum fer a while."

Mrs. Kruttz, in the meantime, had been busy arranging an assortment of clothing and blankets on the floor as a bed for her husband. There was little further conversation between

them except a few remarks regarding the clothes, which threw new light on the character of this strange couple.

"Nex' time ye go out pickin' up things, jus' steer cl'ar o' clo's closets, onlesst yo' pick up a dress er two fer me. We've got more men's coats an' pants an' overcoats 'n' yo'll wear in a dozen y'ars. Ye better stick to the smoke-house business fer a while. Ye either git sompin' we don' need er ye git et stole frum yo' arter ye git et."

"Nobody ever stole inything frum me afore, Mrs. K., an' nobody ever will ag'in," retorted Mr. Kruttz angrily. "An' Jake Bundy an' them fellers with 'im 'll wish't they never done that when I git hold o' 'um."

A few minutes later Mr. Kruttz was lying down on the bed improvised by his wife, who also returned to her couch of stolen garments and blankets. In a few minutes they were asleep.

It was after sun-up when Mrs. Kruttz arose and looked about her, at first a bit puzzled at the character of her "couch"; but a moment later she remembered all and arose to her feet. She had lain down in the evening without altering her attire, and her first interest was in reference to her five guests. She listened for sounds indicating that the girls were "up and aroun'," but hearing nothing of that nature, she opened the door between the two rooms and looked into the main apartment.

It was empty, and the front door was open.

Excitement seized the woman, and she rushed across the floor and through the front doorway. Nobody was in sight.

Back into the kitchen she ran and took hold of her sleeping husband and shook him. The latter awoke drowsily.

"Jule, Jule, wake up!" she exclaimed. "Them gals is gone, iv'ry one uv 'em. They must a' hearn what we said las' night an' cleared out."

CHAPTER XXIII.

FLIGHT.

When Ruth and Violet returned to their sleeping places after the close of the midnight conversation between Mr. and Mrs. Kruttz, they decided that the best thing for them to do was to rise early in the morning and steal away before the lawless couple of the woods got up. If they could get away undiscovered, well and good; if not, they might pretend to be out exploring in the vicinity before breakfast.

None of the other girls had awakened while Ruth and Violet were listening to the remarkable discussion of plotted irregularities in the lean-to kitchen, and the two self-constituted sentinels decided not to disturb them until it was time to get up. So they lay down again, trusting to the power of necessity to work intuitively on their sleeping minds and awaken them at an early hour in the morning. In a few minutes they were asleep.

It was still dark, or rather moonlight, when Ruth again awoke. She lay still for some moments, listening for evidences of conditions of interest to her and her companions in the house. She was soon gratified by hearing the unmistakable snores of Mrs. Kruttz in the kitchen. There being no evidence that Mr. Kruttz was given to sonorous slumber, it was

reasonable to assume that he was sleeping with characteristic quiet.

Ruth now turned her attention to the question of what time it was. As her wristwatch and those of her companions were in the possession of Mrs. Kruttz, there was no timepiece that she might consult. The only clock that these backwoods householders possessed was on the shelf over the stove in the kitchen. And so this girl solver of many problems looked to nature for an answer of the time question.

She remembered that the moon had not yet risen when she first lay down for her night's rest, but she knew that it was due to rise about 10 o'clock. When she first awoke and began to listen to the conversation in the kitchen that revealed to her a startling condition of affairs, she was unable to discover the moon in the comparatively small patch of sky visible from the west window within the horizon of lofty trees. Moreover, a large tree standing a short distance from the hut to the east made it impossible for her to determine how high the moon had risen.

Now, however, a glance through the west window informed her that the moon had passed below the western horizon of the tree tops. Furthermore, the shadow of the trees covered the entire clearing as far as she was able to see. This evidence, together with her feeling of refreshment as a result of her night's rest, convinced her that it was almost daybreak, and she resolved not to invite slum-

ber again by returning to her "mattress" of confessedly stolen garments and blankets.

All of her companions were still asleep, and, as they had little to do to prepare for an early departure, Ruth decided not to wake them until she was ready to start. Fortunately there were several slices of fried ham and half a loaf of bread, left over from supper, which had not been removed to the kitchen. As there seemed to be no paper in this out-of-the-way place that could be used for wrapping purposes, she decided to make the bread and meat into sandwiches to be distributed among them for breakfast after starting again on their "hike toward civilization."

This work was almost a blind girl's task, as the room was darker than it had been in the middle of the night when she awoke and found the mellow rays of the moon illuminating the environs of the hut from its position high in the heavens. But the table was near the window, so that she had the assistance of a little light from the illuminated sky and was able to cut the bread and prepare butterless sandwiches with a fair degree of satisfaction.

Even as she was doing this, however, she fancied that the difficulty of working in the dark grew somewhat less, and after the last sandwich was made, she gazed eagerly, expectantly, out of the window for several minutes for confirmation of her suspicion that dawn was fast arriving. This confirmation

was not long coming, for even as she gazed, she could see a sort of watery paleness diluting the darkness among the trees. Convinced that it was now time for the guests of this shelter of lawlessness to make their departure, she stole softly to the entrance, lifted the heavy wooden latch, and opened the door. No, she was not mistaken—day was breaking.

"I hope Iva is well enough to start out on a day's hike for home," she mused, as she turned to wake her companions, only to discover that Violet and Grace had awakened and were getting up.

Quickly she advanced to each of the rising girls and whispered in her ear the following instruction:

"Don't ask any questions, but follow me. We're going to leave here at once. Get your hat and coat and shoes and come on. And bring your tablefork along, too—we may need it."

Then Ruth gently waked Marie and Iva and gave them like instructions, and a minute or two later all five girls were filing across the clearing and back toward the berry patch in the woods and the highway along which they purposed to flee with all possible haste from the scene of a night of the gravest misgivings and apprehensions.

CHAPTER XXIV.

A STARTLING DISCOVERY.

Because of the scant conveniences afforded the girls for the night in the Kruttz cabin, they had removed only their shoes before retiring, and in order to facilitate a quiet departure, they did not put on their shoes again until they had put thirty or forty yards of twilight timberland between them and the place from which they were fleeing. There they sat down on a log and drew on and laced their footwear with all the haste that might have characterized a similar performance in a "shoe-race" at a picnic.

But there was little else of the picnic aspect in their movements. As they arose from the log and continued their flight, an observer would have noted two peculiar features in their advance: While they endeavored to make as rapid progress as possible, they also were careful, in the gloom of the forest dawn, not to lose the indistinct path they were following, and looked back every now and then to see if their departure had been discovered and they were being pursued.

Ruth still carried the sandwiches, which she distributed near the berry patch. Here they stopped long enough to gather a few handfuls of the luscious fruit as an appetizer to go with their ham-and-bread breakfast.

"We might have gone down to the spring-house and got a drink," Ruth remarked as they continued toward the road; "but I guess it is just as well that we didn't. I wanted to get away from that place as soon as possible."

"There's a spring near the place where we built the fire last night," Iva reminded.

"Yes, we can get a drink there," said Violet. "Thirst is the least of my worries now. I wish we could find as much food in these woods as drinking water."

"And food that's safe to eat," Iva added as she took the last bite of her sandwich.

This remark recalled Iva's recent illness and her fellow fugitives desired to know if she were feeling strong and able to walk all day.

"I'm just a little bit weak," she replied; "but I'm sure the walk won't hurt me if I don't overdo it."

"Whenever you get tired just say so and we'll stop until you get rested," said Ruth.

"How do you think we are going to be able to walk all day with only a sandwich in the way of solid food to eat?" Marie inquired.

"Every time we have to stop for Iva to rest, the rest of us will pick berries," Ruth answered.

"No white currants," Iva warned.

"No white berries of any kind," Ruth declared with prohibitive emphasis. "If you'd been a Camp Fire Girl with a year's experience, you'd never have made that mistake. All Camp Fire Girls know that white berries

are dangerous. Here's a rhyme, Iva, that it would be well for you to learn in order to remember what plants in the woods are likely to prove poisonous:

“ ‘Berries red—
Have no dread;
Berries white—
Poisonous sight;
Leaves three—
Quickly flee.’ ”

“I’ll remember that,” Iva assured her youthful mentor. “It was lucky I didn’t eat any more.”

Presently they reached the highway and made directly for the spring-creek two hundred feet from the site they chose for their camp on the previous evening. After slaking their thirst they set out again on their long hike toward Portage. As they passed the charred embers of the fire they had built to frighten away wild animals in the night, Violet remarked:

“We violated an important Camp Fire rule when we left that fire burning there. It might have resulted in starting a big forest fire.”

“There wasn’t very much danger of that blaze getting to the woods,” Marie observed, “because we were careful to obey another important rule about not building fires close to the timber. But we ought to have put that fire out, nevertheless, before we left this place,

and the reason we forgot that duty was because of Iva's illness."

"Then if these woods had been set afire, it would have been my fault," said Iva inferentially.

"We'd have blamed it onto the poison berries and the fact that you never had an opportunity before to become a Camp Fire Girl and learn about such things," Ruth answered.

"But that reminds me that I have an explanation to make to all of you except Violet as to the reason of this sudden departure. It's something more than merely the suspicions we had last night."

"I was wondering if something new hadn't happened," said Grace eagerly. "What is it?"

But Ruth's explanation was interrupted before it was started by a discovery that created a panic among the fugitive hikers. Marie made the discovery that caused them all to stop suddenly and stare fixedly at an object toward which she pointed with trembling hand.

It was a panther lying beside the road and apparently asleep.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE BIG HONOR.

For two or three minutes the girls stared in awed silence at the fearful object before them, and Violet, who fancied that she was first to recover from the charmed spell, was attempting to attract the attention of her companions and urge a quiet retreat when Ruth suddenly sent forth a ringing laugh and picked up a stone and threw it at the "sleeping" beast. The missile hit the target, which remained motionless.

"Don't you see?—it's dead!" Ruth cried, still laughing; but there was something of the hysterical in her merriment. "There's blood on its head. That's the panther that Arthur Wolf shot last evening."

There was no doubt now that the hurler of the stone had reasoned out the truth as she gazed upon the form of the once savage brute, but she could not throw off entirely the reaction of the terror that had seized her at first sight of the panther. The other girls were inclined to criticise her for committing a rash act when she laughed and threw the stone, but she insisted that she was able to see the blood-stained wound very clearly and she could not resist the temptation to startle her companions "just a little."

"Just a little!" repeated Violet sternly. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Ruth,

That was a very hysterical joke. Suppose that panther's mate had been hiding near and sprung out at us when you threw that stone."

"I admit it, Violet," replied Ruth humbly. "That really wasn't a brilliantly thought-out joke. No sane person in the world would think of giving me any credit for it. I hadn't got over being scared to death when I did it."

They made a hasty examination of the carcass and then hurried on. After they had recovered somewhat from the effects of their fright, the conversation was taken up again where it was interrupted by Marie's discovery.

"Do you know, girls, that the meat we ate last night and with which I prepared your sandwiches this morning was stolen from somebody's smokehouse?" Ruth inquired, addressing the three girls who had been asleep while she and Violet listened to the conversation between Mr. and Mrs. Kruttz.

"I am not surprised to hear it if it is true," Grace replied. "How did you find it out?"

"Violet and I overheard a long talk between the backwoods couple last night while you girls were getting a good night's rest," Ruth answered. "We learned also that that vast assortment of clothes in the house was the product of numerous burglaries. There seems to be an organized gang of bad men living in the woods and they have a leader named Kever."

"Kever!" Grace exclaimed. "I've heard of him. He's known to be a bad one, but he's

awful hard to catch with the goods. The Portage Press has something to say about him every once in a while."

"What does it say?" Ruth inquired.

"Mostly about poaching. Keever and his gang won't pay any attention to the game laws."

"Weren't they ever accused of being thieves and burglars?" Violet asked.

"Oh, it's been hinted at, but nobody ever openly accused them. Most of the thieving around here has been of a petty character until the bank was robbed the other night. That ought to wake people up, and I think they will be very much interested with the story we have to bring back home."

"We'll probably be back home with our story by noon, if not before," Iva surprised the other girls by saying.

"What makes you think that?" Marie inquired.

"Why, no doubt Arthur Wolf drove back along this road looking for us after he escaped from those burglars, and when he arrived home without us, the whole town turned out to find us. I'm surprised that someone hasn't happened along looking for us before now.

"There's reason in what Iva says," declared Ruth; "but it also makes me fear that it wasn't Arthur after all who shouted, honked his horn, and shot the panther. And, by the way, Iva's remark about the burglars reminds me of something that I forgot to tell you. Mr.

Kruttz was the leader of the gang that robbed the bank."

This announcement was received with exclamations of surprise from Marie, Grace and Iva.

"Yes," continued Ruth; "and his pals jumped on his back, overpowered him, took the stolen money from him and got away with it. Then they held up the automobile we were riding in, ordered us out and forced Arthur Wolf to drive them toward Canada."

"Goodness!" exclaimed Grace. "Did you girls overhear all that while the rest of us were asleep?"

"We did," Ruth answered with a smile.

"Finish your story and tell us why you asked us to bring these forks along," Grace urged. "You didn't think we'd want to eat berries with them, did you?"

"Now, you're making fun of me," said Ruth with playful reproachfulness. "But I'll answer you seriously. I was afraid we might be followed and we ought to have some sort of weapon with us."

"Would you advise us to fight a strong man even with a sharp pointed steel tablefork in the hand of each of us?" asked Iva.

"If he attacks us, yes."

"But suppose he should come at us with a club—even five girls armed with five tableforks wouldn't stand much show."

"He wouldn't be likely to use a club unless he knew in advance that we were armed."

Ruth argued. "And for that reason, I say, keep your forks hidden. I hope we shan't be molested, but if we are, make good use of them at close quarters, and he'll run just as if he'd stumbled into a hornets' nest."

"I really believe you mean all that," Grace declared with a look of half credulous wonder.

"I surely do," Ruth replied.

"You're a brave girl."

"It takes a brave girl to fire a stone at a dead panther and then go into hysterics over it," Ruth declared with mock dignity.

"But all this sensational bravery doesn't earn Camp Fire honors for us," Marie commented at this juncture. "I move that we give attention to the subjects we were interested in when we started from Portage yesterday morning. We won't have to delay much. I have my notebook in my pocket yet and I suppose, Ruth and Violet, you have yours. If we give a little attention to our honor work, it will relieve this tramp of some of its unpleasantness."

"I have another suggestion for honor work right now, and it's of such importance that I think you'll all vote with me that we ought to put aside everything that may hinder it in the least," Ruth announced impressively. "It reminds me also that I have still another bit of information for you far more important than anything else I've told you. I seem to have a faculty of making my most important announcements last. But here it is:

"These bad men of the woods, it seems, think they are the only ones that have any rights around here, and they are up in arms, almost, over this plan of the Boston and Maine Lumber Company to begin logging on a large scale in these timber lands. They have an agreement among them, according to the conversation Violet and I overheard, to burn these woods as soon as they are sure the lumbering plan is going through. You know that we informed Mrs. Kruttz of the nature of father's business up here. Well, she told her husband, and he got excited and said he must see Keever right away. I took it from what he said that the fire would be started as soon as the word could be passed along, didn't you, Violet?"

The latter nodded her head.

"Well, here comes the Camp Fire honor part. In the list of patriotism honors is one item entitled 'conservation of trees or forests'. Now, if we get warning to the authorities in time to prevent a great forest fire, won't that be 'forest conservation'? Of course, we ought to do it anyway, but here is an honor to work for, which we ought to put ahead of any other honor on our list. Let's not delay for anything except Iva's health. Let's hike for all we're worth."

"I'm all right, just as strong as ever, only hungry," Iva protested.

Every one of the girls quickly got the spirit of this new motive and their pace brisked up

considerably. Half a mile further on, as they turned a slight bend in the road, they found themselves within a hundred yards of a solitary traveler who was walking toward them. His appearance was not at all prepossessing. He wore a full beard and coarse, loose-fitting clothes, while his gait appeared sullen and slouching.

"Be brave, girls; I think he's going to speak to us," said Ruth in low tones as they drew nearer. "He probably won't make us any trouble if we don't act scared. Hide your forks, but keep them ready for use—and, above all, wait for a signal from me."

CHAPTER XXVI.

FORKS CONCEALED.

There seemed to be no doubt that the lone pedestrian intended to accost the five fugitive hikers from the moment when he and the party of girls came in view of each other, and Ruth was quickly on the alert to devise plans for meeting any evidence of unfriendliness on his part.

"If he shows a disposition to get ugly and refuses to let us pass him peacefully," she said in a low tone to her companions; "we'll form a circle around him, and at a signal from me, out with your forks and at him. And rest assured, I'll give the signal only as a last resort."

True to expectations, the man planted himself squarely in front of the girls and addressed them thus, with a bold, yet half embarrassed simulation of politeness:

"'Scuse me, ladies, but be ye lost?"

"No, we are not," Ruth replied. "We know our way very well."

"Where be ye boun' fer?" was the fellow's next query.

"We're going to Portage, the place we came from," answered Ruth, who continued as spokesman for her party without interruption from any of the latter.

"Ye's a long ways from home, ben't ye?"

"Yes, quite a distance, and for that reason we must hurry along; so if you please won't delay us any more, we'll be ever so much obliged."

"Oh, I wouldn't delay ye fer all the worl', only I'm purty sartin I kin help ye more'n ye've got iny idee."

"We'd be very glad to accept your help if we were in need of it," Ruth said in a tone of conditional appreciation; "but we are in need of absolutely nothing."

"Ye ain't had no breekfus, have ye?" continued the inquisitor insistently.

"Of course we have. What do you take us for—tramps?"

The man did not answer this question. He put another, which was more to his purpose.

"Ye look hungry," he said. "Where be yo' goin' to git yer dinner?"

This was a problem of such deep interest to the girls that Ruth could not dismiss it as indifferently as she had dismissed the question relative to their early morning sandwiches, berries and spring water. She hesitated, for she was not clever at fabricating untruths.

"I thought ye was in trouble o' some kind," the man continued without giving Ruth time to frame an answer. "Young ladies like you-uns don't git way off in a lonesome place like this so arly in the mornin'. Ye didn't hoof it all this ways from Portage, did ye?"

"No, we didn't," Ruth admitted. "But what of it?"

"Oh, nothin'," the provoking fellow answered; "only it's kinda queer what come of yer rig."

"You mean our automobile," Ruth corrected.

"Yes, yer autymoble, ef that's what ye come in."

"That's easily answered," said Ruth quickly. "It was stolen from us by some highwaymen who forced us to walk back home."

"Sho! ye don't say. Now, wa'n't I kerrect whin I said ye needed help? I think ye's afeerd o' me, an' the's no need a' ye bein' afeerd a bit. I wouldn't hurt ye fer a million dollars. Ef ye'll jus' trust me, I'll help ye so't yer troubles 'll soon be over."

"What will you do?" Ruth inquired.

"I'll take ye to a place where ye can have all ye want to eat an' a telyphone."

Exclamations of surprise from two or three of the girls greeted this announcement.

"A telephone!" Ruth exclaimed incredulously. "There's no telephone around here."

"Oh, yes, they is," the fellow replied with confounding assurance. "The's a telyphone in half a mile o' here. Ef ye'll foller me I'll take ye right to it."

"Which way?" Ruth asked.

"Right this way—come on," the man answered, turning around and leading the way southward.

As this was the direction in which the girls had been traveling, they could offer no objec-

tion to the proceeding. The man attempted to lead them into further conversation, but being unsuccessful in this, he volunteered a lengthy explanation as to how it happened that a human being, living in a wilderness inhabited perhaps by less than one person to the square mile, should be supplied with so communistic a convenience as a telephone. The substance of this explanation was that the trunk line between Portage and the nearest settlement to the north ran close to this person's home and, to relieve the lonesomeness of life in the great woods for his family, he had caused an extension to be made to his house.

Ten minutes after their new acquaintance took up his self-imposed duty as guide for the girls, he turned into a path that led into the timber on the right side of the road and requested the girls to follow him. A look of warning exchanged from one to another by the girls served to inform all of them that they were of one mind on the subject, and they continued on their way regardless of the request of their "leader."

The latter observed quickly what they were doing and turned and ran as if to head them off.

"Now we're in for it, as I feared," said Ruth with a look of grim determination. "Remember the circle if he tries to stop us, and grip your forks and hold yourselves ready for the word from me."

CHAPTER XXVII.

FORKS REVEALED.

"What's the matter—don' ye wan' to telyphone?" demanded the self-appointed guide as he took up a position again directly in front of the girls.

"Yes, but we've decided not to go in there to telephone," Ruth replied firmly.

"Why not?" inquired the man in a very much "hurt" tone of voice.

"Because we prefer to continue on our way without stopping. We have a long walk before us and if we stop to telephone, we may not be able to get to Portage before dark."

"But ye kin' telyphone fer yer folks to come an' git ye in a kerrige, er autymoble."

"How far is the place from this road?" asked Grace.

"Only a short ways," replied the man.

"How far—nalf a mile?"

"No, no," said the fellow with a gesture of impatience; "ye kin walk it in five minutes."

"Who lives there?"

"Keever."

"You don't mean to tell me that Mr. Keever has a telephone?" Grace inquired in a challenging voice.

"Why not? C'urse 'e has."

"I know every name in the Portage district telephone book, and I know there's no such name as Keever in it," Grace declared.

The man seemed to grope for something that would enable him to maintain his position plausibly. After a short hesitation he answered his challenger thus:

"Keever just had his telyphone put in."

"Well, maybe it isn't in service yet," said Ruth. "We haven't time to stop and find out."

"What ye be'n doin' way out here?" inquired the man, evidently deciding that a change of subject would serve his purpose better. "Didn't nobody come with ye?"

"Of course."

"Who?"

"My father and my brother and the driver of the machine we girls were in."

"Where be they now?"

"My father and my brother are up in the woods several miles from here."

"What be they doin'? Buyin' of land?"

This query and the cunning look that accompanied it caused Ruth to exercise more caution in answering the fellow's questions. Somehow she could not avoid associating his manner and inquiries with certain things she had overheard in the Kruttz cabin.

"My father isn't going to buy any land," she replied truthfully enough.

"No?" returned the man with a shade of sarcasm. "Be ye sure he ain't goin' to buy any land fer somebody else?"

"You'll have to ask him?" Ruth answered.

"Ain't yer old man in the lumber business?"

"I haven't any 'old man'."

"Well, yer father, then."

"No, he isn't. My father is a lawyer."

"Ain't 'e working' fer that lumber comp'ny what's tryin' to buy all these woods?"

"If you're so interested in real estate, why don't you come and see my father?" said Ruth. "He'll tell you all about it. Don't you think it's very foolish for you to try to get information of this kind out of a lot of young girls who have never had any business experience? Are you the owner of all this timber land, or does it belong to your friend, Mr. Keever?"

"None o' yer business!" retorted the man angrily, no doubt suspecting that the girl was making sport of him. "I want ye to answer my question."

"Let's see, what was your question?" asked Ruth, who was playing for time, hoping that somebody might appear on the scene and compel the disreputable intruder to cease his interference.

"Be somebody goin' to buy all this land?"

"How do you want me to answer that question?" Ruth inquired.

"How?" exclaimed her inquisitor in disgust.

"Yes," Ruth replied. "Do you want me to answer it 'yes' or 'no'? If I say no, you won't believe me, will you?"

The fellow's face clouded. He was beginning to look dangerous. Ruth feared she had gone too far, and began to study how she might conciliate him. However, she gripped the handle of her fork, which she held in the

pocket of her skirt, and looked significantly at her companions. The latter gripped their forks, which were concealed in like manner, and moved slowly to form a circle around the man.

The ruffian advanced in a threatening manner toward Ruth, but stopped half a dozen feet from her. Perhaps he was puzzled by the courageous look in her eyes and the firmness with which she stood her ground. Perhaps, too, the fact that each of the girls had consistently kept one hand in her pocket thus far during the interview warned him that they might be supplied with firearms. At any rate, it suddenly occurred to Ruth that it might be a good move on her part to lead him to believe that they were prepared to protect themselves with pistols.

"You'd better be careful," she said, looking as dangerous as it was possible for her to look, "because we girls are armed, and you may get hurt if you don't step aside and let us pass."

The man uttered a guffaw of contempt, which may or may not have expressed all that he felt.

"Let's see yer shootin' iurns," he demanded, advancing a step nearer.

"Be careful," Ruth warned, looking far more determined and courageous than she felt.

"Be careful," repeated each of the other

girls as they completed the circle according to prearranged plans.

The ruffian looked about him nervously, but more angrily than ever. At this juncture Ruth beheld a sight, not more than a quarter of a mile ahead in the road, which made her feel like cheering. It was one, two, three automobiles filled with men. Evidently they saw the girls, for several of the men were on their feet, waving their hands. They had just turned a bend in the road and come into view. Fortunately the engines were making little noise. It was all that Ruth could do to keep from exposing her exultation.

The situation in a moment became tense with possibilities. If she could only prevent a violent climax two or three minutes longer and the searching party should continue to approach quietly, they might make an important capture. Ruth was convinced by this time that the uncouth character who had interrupted their hike toward Portage was a member of the organization of thieves and poachers who had plotted to burn this section of the great northern woods rather than let it become converted into a lumber camp.

"Tell me why you want to know about the plan of a lumber company to buy up these woods," she said slowly, drawing out every word "impressively" for the sole purpose of delay.

The man's threatening attitude relaxed somewhat, and he made a noncommittal reply,

which pleased Ruth very well. She followed with another question, indicating a disposition to yield if she could only be satisfied as to his purpose. He fenced back in his coarse, but shrewd manner. This contest of wits continued until the three automobiles were within 600 or 700 feet of the strange scene and all of Ruth's companions had become conscious of their approach and were eagerly watching every opportunity to aid their clever leader in her evident design.

Suddenly, however, the man became enraged at the manner in which Ruth was playing with him and advanced again as if to strike her. She stepped back a few paces, uttering a warning "Look out!" as she did so. He continued to advance with uplifted arm, demanding an unequivocal answer to his question. The other girls kept the circle closed around him. The automobile drew nearer. A slight "chug-chug" of the engines could be heard. Ruth decided she must keep the situation tense, or the ruffian would discover the motive of her trick and make a dash into the woods. There was only one thing now for her to do, and she did it.

"Out with your weapons, girls!" she cried, drawing one of Mrs. Kruttz's tableforks from her pocket.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

FORKS WIN.

To Mr. Kruttz the situation was ludicrous, as long as he saw only one "hat-pin substitute" menacing his physical comfort. Yes, the man who had brought to a halt the journey of the five girls and demanded from them information relative to the proposed purchase of several thousand acres of timberland was none other than Jule Kruttz, who had made all speed to head them off after his wife informed him of their unannounced departure. His purpose in attempting to entice them to the home of Keever was to get from them by stealth the information he desired, without arousing their suspicion, and then permit them to go on their way without further hindrance.

There was enough humor in his nature to inspire a loud guffaw of amusement at the sight of the tablefork with which Ruth threatened to do him bodily harm. But the signal from the girl to her companions impelled him to look about somewhat apprehensively, and the sight of the five sharp-pronged tableforks pointed at him by five resolute girls caused him to look upon the situation a little more seriously. What he would have done next, if aid had not arrived for the "armed enemy" at this moment, is a question that will never be answered.

It is probable that the five girl heroines never would have carried out their "tablefork program" as courageously as they did if they had not been conscious of the near approach of help. As for Mr. Kruttz, when he saw three auto-loads of armed men within easy gunshot, he "surrendered to the tableforks," and the girls "held" their prisoner until the party of rescuers gathered around them, pouring forth volumes of questions and expressions of admiration and wonder.

Explanations were exchanged rapidly after the initial confusion had been disposed of. Among the rescuers were Mr. Hazelton and Fred and Mr. Stevens. Arthur Wolf had reached home about 10 o'clock the night before and aroused the town with his thrilling story of how the bank robbers had pressed him and Mr. Stevens' machine into service and how he had later escaped with the stolen money and searched vainly for the girls who had been left to the mercies of the wilderness fifteen miles from home. A searching party, gathered together quickly, drove along the route as far as the lodge of the "cruisers," where Mr. Hazelton and Fred were awakened and informed of what had taken place, and the hunt for the lost girls was continued up to the time of the rescue.

One of the men in the searching party recognized the prisoner as Kruttz, and at the utterance of the latter's name, Ruth volunteered to tell the story of the girls' night ad-

venture in the cabin of the lawless backwoods couple. One of the rescuers was the county sheriff, and as soon as he heard the account of the plot to burn the forest, he proceeded to the near-by hut of Keever and placed him under arrest. Mrs. Kruttz also was taken into custody in the course of the day, and incidentally the girls' watches, rings, and bracelets were recovered.

The thrilling adventures of the five girls on their return hike toward Portage resulted in delaying considerably the progress of Mr. Hazelton's inspection of the work of the "cruisers," so that the sojourn in northern Maine was several days longer than had originally been expected. During the remainder of the visit there were no more adventures such as they had just experienced, and Ruth, Voilet, and Marie had ample time to complete a Camp Fire organization for their new friends and to add to their own records a number of useful outdoor achievements to be reported a few weeks later to Flamingo Camp Fire as a basis of honors for themselves.

* * * *

The next volume of this series will be:

CAMP FIRE GIRLS IN DIXIE,

or

PEGGY'S DESERTED PLANTATION.



ROSAMOND,
OR,
THE YOUTHFUL ERROR.
A TALE OF RIVERSIDE.

CHAPTER I.

THE OWNER OF RIVERSIDE.

ALL the day long the September rain had fallen, and when the night closed in it showed no sign of weariness, but with the same monotonous patter dropped upon the roof, or beat against the windows of the pleasantly lighted room where a young man sat gazing at the glowing grate, and listening apparently to the noise of the storm without. But neither the winds, nor yet the rain, had a part of that young man's thoughts, for they were with the past, and the chain which linked them to that past was the open letter which lay on the table beside him. For that letter he had waited long and anxiously, wondering what it would contain, and if his overtures for reconciliation with one who had erred far more than himself, would be accepted. It had come at last, and with a gathering coldness at his heart he had read the decision,—“she

would ~~not~~ be reconciled," and she bade him "go his way alone and leave her to herself."

"It is well," he said; "I shall never trouble her again,"—and with a feeling of relief, as if a heavy load, a dread of coming evil, had been taken from his mind, he threw the letter upon the table, and leaning back in his cushioned chair, tried to fancy that the last few years of his life were blotted out.

"Could it be so, Ralph Browning would be a different man," he said aloud; then, as he glanced round the richly furnished room, he continued—"People call me happy, and so perhaps I might be, but for this haunting memory. Why was it suffered to be, and must I make a life-long atonement for that early sin?"

In his excitement he arose, and crushing the letter for a moment in his hand, hurled it into the fire; then, going to his private drawer, he took out and opened a neatly folded package, containing a long tress of jet black hair. Shudderingly he wound it around his fingers, laid it over the back of his hand, held it up to the light, and then with a hard, dark look upon his face, threw it, too, upon the grate, saying aloud, "Thus perisheth every memento of the past, and I am free again—free as air!"

He walked to the window, and pressing his burning forehead against the cool, damp pane, looked out upon the night. He could not see through the darkness, but had it been day, his eye would have rested on broad acres all his own; for Ralph Browning was a wealthy man, and the house in which he lived was his by right of inheritance from a bachelor uncle for whom he had been named and who, two years before our story opens, had died, leaving to his nephew the grand old place, called *Riverside*, from its nearness to

the river. It was a most beautiful spot; and when its new master first took possession of it, the maids and matrons of Granby, who had mourned for the elder Browning as people mourn for a good man, felt themselves somewhat consoled from the fact that his successor was young and handsome, and would doubtless prove an invaluable acquisition to their fireside circles, and furnish a theme for gossip, without which no village can well exist. But in the first of their expectations they were mistaken, for Mr. Browning shunned rather than sought society, and spent the most of his leisure hours in the seclusion of his library, where, as Mrs. Peters, his housekeeper, said, he did nothing but mope over books and walk the floor. "He was melancholy," she said; "there was something workin' on his mind, and what it was she didn't know more'n the dead—though she knew as well as she wanted to, that he had been crossed in love, for what else would make so many of his hairs gray, and he not yet twenty-five!"

That there was a mystery connected with him, was conceded by most of the villagers, and many a curious gaze she bent upon the grave, dignified young man, who seldom joined in their pastime or intruded himself upon their company. Much sympathy was expressed for him in his loneliness, by the people of Granby, and more than one young girl would gladly have imposed upon herself the task of cheering that loneliness; but he seemed perfectly invulnerable to maiden charms; and when Mrs. Peters, as she often did, urged him "to take a wife and be somebody," he answered quietly, "I am content to follow the example of my uncle. I shall probably never marry."

Still he was lonely in his great house—so lonely that,

though it hurt his pride to do it, he wrote the letter, the answer to which excited him so terribly, and awoke within his mind a train of thought so absorbing and intense, that he did not hear the summons to supper until Mrs. Peters put her head into the room, asking "if he were deaf or what."

Mrs Peters had been in the elder Browning's household for years, and when the new owner came, she still continued at her post, and exercised over her young master a kind of motherly care, which he permitted because he knew her real worth, and that without her his home would be uncomfortable indeed. On the occasion of which we write, Mrs. Peters was unusually attentive, and to a person at all skilled in female tactics, it was evident that she was about to ask a favor, and had made preparations accordingly. His favorite waffles had been buttered exactly right—the peaches and cream were delicious—the fragrant black tea was neither too strong nor too weak—the fire blazed brightly in the grate—the light from the chandelier fell softly upon the massive silver service and damask cloth;—and with all these creature comforts around him, it is not strange that he forgot the letter and the tress of hair which so lately had blackened on the coals. The moment was propitious, and by the time he had finished his second cup, Mrs. Peters said, "I have something to propose."

Leaning back in his chair, he looked inquiringly at her and she continued: "You remember Mrs. Leyton, the poor woman who had seen better days, and lived in East Granby?"

"Yes."

"You know she has been sick, and you gave me leave to carry her anything I chose?"

“Yes.”

“Well, she’s dead, poor thing, and what is worse, she hain’t no connection, nor never had, and her little daughter Rosamond hain’t a place to lay her head.”

“Let her come and sleep with you then,” said Mr. Browning, rattling his spoon upon the edge of his cup.

“Yes, and what’ll she do days?” continued Mrs Peters. “She can’t run the streets, that’s so; now, I don’t believe no great in children, and you certainly don’t b’lieve in ’em at all nor your poor uncle before you; but Rosamond ain’t a child, she’s *thirteen*—most a woman—and if you don’t mind the expense, I shan’t mind the trouble, and she can live here till she finds a place. Her mother, you know, took up millinering to get a living.”

“Certainly, let her come,” answered Mr. Browning, who was noted for his benevolence.

This matter being thus satisfactorily settled, Mrs. Peters arose from the table, while Mr. Browning went back to the olden memories which had haunted him so much that day, and with which there was not mingled a single thought of the little Rosamond, who was to exert so strong an influence upon his future life.

CHAPTER II.

ROSAMOND LEYTON.

ROSAMOND had been some weeks at Riverside, and during all that time Mr. Browning had scarcely noticed her at all. On the first day of her arrival he had spoken kindly to her, asking her how old she was, and how long her mother had been dead, and this was all the attention he had paid to her. He did not even yet know the color of her eyes, or texture of her hair.—whether it were curly or straight, black or brown; but he knew in various ways that she was there—knew it by the sound of dancing feet upon the stairs, which were wont to echo only to Mrs. Peters' heavy tread—knew it by the tasteful air his room suddenly assumed—by the ringing laugh and musical songs which came often from the kitchen, and by the thousand changes which the presence of a merry-hearted girl of thirteen brings to a hitherto silent house. Of him Rosamond stood considerably in awe, and though she could willingly have worshipped him for giving her so pleasant a home, she felt afraid of him and kept out of his way, watching him with childish curiosity at a distance, admiring his noble figure, and wondering if she would ever dare speak to him as fearlessly as Mrs. Peters did.

From this woman Rosamond received all a mother's care, and though the name of her lost parent was often on her lips. she was beginning to be very happy in her

new home, when one day toward the middle of October Mrs. Peters told her that Mr. Browning's only sister, a Mrs. Van Vechten, who lived South, was coming to Riverside, together with her son Ben. The lady Mrs. Peters had never seen, but Ben, who was at school in Albany, had spent a vacation there, and she described him as a "great, good-natured fool," who cared for nothing but dogs, cigars, fast horses and pretty girls.

Rosamond pushed back the stray curls which had fallen over her face, glanced at the cracked mirror which gave her *two* noses instead of one, and thinking to herself, "I wonder if he'll care for me," listened attentively while Mrs. Peters continued,—“This Miss Van Vechten is a mighty fine lady, they say, and has heaps of niggers to wait on her at home,—but she can't bring 'em here, for *I* should set 'em free—that's so. I don't b'lieve in't. What was I sayin'? Oh, I know, she can't wait on herself, and wrote to have her brother get some one. He asked me if you'd be willin' to put on her clothes, wash her face, and *charo her victuals* like enough.”

“Mr. Browning never said that,” interrupted Rosamond, and Mrs. Peters replied—“Well, not that exactly, but he wants you to wait on her generally.”

“I'll do any thing reasonable,” answered Rosamond. “When will she be here?”

“In two or three days,” said Mrs. Peters, “and I must hurry, or I shan't have them north chambers ready for her. Ben ain't coming quite so soon.”

The two or three days passed rapidly, and at the close of the third a carriage laden with trunks stopped before the gate at Riverside, and Mrs. Van Vechten had come. She was a thin, sallow-faced, proud-looking woman, wholly unlike her brother, whose senior she

was by many years. She had seen much of the world, and that she was conscious of her own fancied superiority was perceptible in every movement. She was Mrs. Richard Van Vechten, of Alabama—one of the oldest families in the state. Her deceased husband had been United States Senator—she had been to Europe—had seen the Queen on horseback—had passed the residence of the Duchess of Sutherland, and when Rosamond Leyton appeared before her in her neatly-fitting dress of black and asked what she could do for her, she elevated her eyebrows, and coolly surveying the little girl, answered haughtily, “Comb out my hair.”

“Yes, I will,” thought Rosamond, who had taken a dislike to the grand lady, and suiting the action to the thought, she did *comb out* her hair, pulling it so unmercifully that Mrs. Van Vechten angrily bade her stop.

“Look at me, girl,” said she; “did you ever assist at any one’s toilet before?”

“I’ve hooked Mrs. Peter’s dress and pinned on Bridget’s collar,” answered Rosamond, her great brown eyes brimming with mischief.

“Disgusting!” returned Mrs. Van Vechten—“I should suppose Ralph would know better than to get me such an ignoramus. Were you hired on purpose to wait on me?”

“Why, no, ma’am—I live here,” answered Rosamond.

“Live here!” repeated Mrs. Van Vechten, “and pray, what do you do?”

“Nothing much, unless I choose,” said Rosamond, who, being a great pet with Mrs. Peters and the other servants, really led a very easy life at Riverside.

Looking curiously into the frank, open face of the young girl, Mrs. Van Vechten concluded she was never intended to take a negro's place, and with a wave of her hand she said, "You may go; I can dress myself alone."

That evening, as the brother and sister sat together in the parlor, the latter suddenly asked, "Who is that Rosamond Leyton, and what is she doing here?"

Mr. Browning told her all he knew of the girl, and she continued, "Do you intend to educate her?"

"Educate her!" said he—"what made you think of that?"

"Because," she answered, with a sarcastic smile, "as you expect to do penance the rest of your lifetime, I did not know but you would deem it your duty to educate every beggar who came along."

The idea of educating Rosamond Leyton was new to Mr. Browning, but he did not tell his sister so—he merely said, "And suppose I do educate her?"

"In that case," answered the lady, "Ben will not pass his college vacations here, as I had intended that he should do."

"And why not?" asked Mr. Browning.

"Why not?" repeated Mrs. Van Vechten. "Just as though you did not know how susceptible he is to female beauty, and if you treat this Rosamond as an equal, it will be like him to fall in love with her at once. She is very pretty, you know."

Mr. Browning did not know any such thing. In fact, he scarcely knew how the young girl looked, but his sister's remark had awakened in him an interest, and after she had retired, which she did early, he rang the bell for Mrs. Peters, who soon appeared in answer to his call.

"Is Rosamond Leyton up," he asked.

"Yes, sir," answered Mrs. Peters, wondering at the question.

"Send her to me," he said, and with redoubled amazement Mrs. Peters carried the message to Rosamond, who was sitting before the fire, trying in vain to undo an obstinate knot in her boot-string.

"Mr. Browning sent for me!" she exclaimed, her cheeks flushing up. "Wants to scold me, I suppose, for pulling his sister's hair. I only did what she told me to," and with a beating heart she started for the parlor.

Rosamond was afraid of Mr. Browning, and feeling sure that he intended to reprove her, she took the chair nearest to the door, and covering her face with her hands, began to cry, saying—"It was ugly in me, I know, to pull Mrs. Van Vechten's hair, and I did it on purpose, too; but I won't do so again, I certainly won't."

Mr. Browning was confounded. This was the first intimation he had received of the *barbaric* performance, and for a moment he remained silent, gazing at the little girl. Her figure was very slight, her feet and hands were very small, and her hair, though disordered now and rough, was of a beautiful brown, and fell in heavy curls around her neck. He saw all this at a glance, but her face, the point to which his attention was chiefly directed, he could not see until those little hands were removed, and as a means of accomplishing this he at last said, kindly—"I do not understand you, Rosamond. My sister has entered no complaint, and I did not send for you to censure you. I wish to talk with you—to get acquainted. Will you come and sit by me upon the sofa?"

Rosamond's hands came down from her face, but she did not leave her seat; neither did Mr. Browning now wish to have her, for the light of the chandelier fell full upon her, giving him a much better view of her features than if she had been nearer to him. If, as Mrs. Peters had said, Ben Van Vechten was fond of pretty girls, he in a measure inherited the feeling from his uncle, who was an ardent admirer of the beautiful, and who now felt a glow of satisfaction in knowing that Rosamond Leyton was pretty. It was a merry, sparkling, little face which he looked upon, and though the nose did turn up a trifle, and the mouth was rather wide, the soft, brown eyes, and exquisitely fair complexion made ample amends for all. She was never intended for a menial—she would make a beautiful woman—and with thoughts similar to these, Mr Browning, after completing his survey of her person, said—"Have you been to school much?"

"Always, until I came here," was her answer; and he continued—"And since then you have not looked in a book, I suppose?"

The brown eyes opened wide as Rosamond replied,—“Why, yes I have. I've read ever so much in your library when you were gone. Mrs. Peters told me I might,” she added hastily, as she saw his look of surprise, and mistook it for displeasure.

“I am perfectly willing,” he said; “but what have you read? Tell me.”

Rosamond was interested at once, and while her cheeks glowed and her eyes sparkled she replied—"Oh, I've read Shakspeare's Historical Plays, every one of them—and Childe Harold, and Watts on the Mind, and Kenilworth, and now I'm right in the middle of the Lady of the Lake. Wasn't Fitz-James the King?"

believe he was. When I a molder I mean to write a book just like that."

Mr. Browning could not forbear a smile at her enthusiasm, but without answering her question, he said,—“What do you intend to do until you are old enough?”

Rosamond's countenance fell, and after tapping her foot upon the carpet awhile, she said, “Mrs. Peters will get me a place by-and-by, and I s'pose I'll have to be a milliner.”

“Do you wish to be one?”

“Why, no; nor mother didn't either, but after father died she had to do something. Father was a kind of a lawyer, and left us poor.”

“Do you wish to go away from here, Rosamond?”

There were tears on the long-fringed eyelashes as the young girl replied, “No, sir; I'd like to live here always, but there's nothing for me to do.”

“Unless you go to school. How would you like that?”

“I have no one to pay the bills,” and the curly head shook mournfully.

“I have money, Rosamond, and suppose I say that you shall stay here and go to school?”

“Oh, sir, *will* you say so? *May* I live with you always?” and forgetting her fear of him in her great joy, Rosamond Leyton crossed over to where he sat, and laying both her hands upon his shoulder continued—“Are you in earnest, Mr. Browning? May I stay? Oh, I'll be so good to you when you are old and sick!”

It seemed to her that he was old enough to be her father, then, and it almost seemed so to him. Giving her a very paternal look, he answered, “Yes, child, you

shall stay as long as you like ; and now go, or Mrs. Peters will be wondering what keeps you."

Rosamond started to leave the room, but ere she reached the door she paused, and turning to Mr. Browning, said, " You have made me *so* happy, and I like you so much, I wish you'd let me kiss your hand—may I ? "

It was a strange question, and it sent the blood tingling to the very tips of Mr. Browning's fingers.

' Why, ye-es,—I don't know. What made you think of that ? " he said, and Rosamond replied,—“ I always kissed father when he made me very happy. It was all I could do."

" But I am not your father," stammered Mr. Browning ; " I shall not be twenty-five until November. Still you can do as you please."

" Not twenty-five yet," repeated Rosamond ;—" why, I thought you were near *forty*. I don't believe I'd better, though I like you just as well. Good night."

He heard her go through the hall, up the stairs, through the upper hall, and then all was still again.

" What a strange little creature she is," he thought ; " so childlike and frank, but how queer that she should ask to *kiss me* ! Wouldn't Susan be shocked if she knew it, and won't she be horrified when I tell her I *am* going to educate the girl. I shouldn't have thought of it but for her. And suppose Ben does fall in love with her. If he knew a little more, it would not be a bad match. Somebody must keep up our family, or it will become extinct. Susan and I are the only ones left, and I " —here he paused, and starting to his feet, he paced the floor hurriedly, nervously, as if seeking to escape from some pursuing evil. " It is terrible," he whispered, " but I *can* bear it and will," and going to his room he

sought his pillow to dream strange dreams of tresses black and ringlets brown,—of fierce, dark eyes, and shining orbs, whose owner had asked to kiss his hand, and mistaken him for her sire.

CHAPTER III.

BEN'S VISIT.

THE next morning, as Mrs. Van Vechten was slowly making her toilet alone, there came a gentle rap at her door, and Rosamond Leyton appeared, her face fresh and blooming as a rosebud, her curls brushed back from her forehead, and her voice very respectful, as she said—"I have come to ask your pardon for my roughness yesterday. I can do better, and if you will let me wait on you while you stay, I am sure I shall please you."

Mrs. Van Vechten could not resist that appeal, and she graciously accepted the girl's offer, asking her the while what had made the change in her behavior. Always frank and truthful, Rosamond explained to the lady that Mr. Browning's kindness had filled her with gratitude and determined her to do as she had done. To her Mrs. Van Vechten said nothing, but when she met her brother at the breakfast table, there was an ominous frown upon her face, and the moment they were alone she gave him her opinion without reserve. But Mr. Browning was firm. "He should have something to live for," he said, "and Heaven only knew the lonely hours he passed with no object in which to be interested. Her family, though unfortunate, are highly respectable," he added, "and if I can make her a useful ornament in society, it is my duty to do so."

Mrs. Van Vechten knew how useless it would be to

remonstrate with him, and she gave up the contest, mentally resolving that "Ben should not pass his College vacations there."

When the villagers learned that Mr. Browning intended to educate Rosamond and treat her as his equal, they ascribed it wholly to the influence of his sister, who, of course, had suggested to him an act which seemed every way right and proper. They did not know how the lady opposed it, nor how, for many days, she maintained a cold reserve toward the young girl, who strove in various ways to conciliate her, and at last succeeded so far that she not only accepted her services at her toilet, but even asked of her sometimes to read her to sleep in the afternoon, a process neither long nor tedious, for Mrs. Van Vechten was not literary, and by the time the second page was reached she usually nodded her full acquiescence to the author's opinions, and Rosamond was free to do as she pleased.

One afternoon when Mrs. Van Vechten was fast asleep, and Rosamond deep in the "Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner," (the former having selected that poem as an opiate because of its musical jingle,) there was the sound of a bounding step upon the stairs, accompanied by the stirring notes of Yankee Doodle, which some one whistled at the top of his voice. Rosamond was about going to see who it was, when the door opened and disclosed to view a long lank, light-haired, good-natured looking youth, dressed in the extreme of fashion, with a huge gold chain dangling across his vest, and an immense diamond ring upon his little finger. This last he managed to show frequently by caressing his chin, where, by the aid of a microscope, a very little down might possibly have been found! This was Ben! He had just arrived. and

learning that his mother was in her room, had entered it unceremoniously. The unexpected apparition of a beautiful young girl startled him, and he introduced himself to her good graces by the very expressive exclamation, "*Thunder!* I beg your pardon, Miss," he continued, as he met her surprised and reproving glance. "You scared me so I didn't know what else to say. It's a favorite expression of mine, but I'll quit it, if you say so. Do you live here?"

"I wait upon your mother," was the quiet answer, which came near wringing from the young man a repetition of the offensive word.

But he remembered himself in time, and then continued, "How do you know she's my mother? You are right, though. I'm Ben Van Vechten—the veriest dolt in school, they say. But, as an offset, I've got a heart as big as an ox; and now, who are you? I know you are not a waiting-maid!"

Rosamond explained who she was, and then, rather pleased with his off-hand manner, began to question him concerning his journey, and so forth. Ben was delighted. It was not every girl who would of her own accord talk to him, and sitting down beside her, he told her twice that she was handsome, was cautiously winding his arm around her waist, when from the rosewood bedstead there came the sharp, quick word, "Benjamin!" and, unmindful of Rosamond's presence, Ben leaped into the middle of the room, ejaculating, "Thunder! mother what do you want?"

"I want *her* to leave the room," said Mrs. Van Vechten, pointing toward Rosamond, who, wholly ignorant of the nature of her offence, retreated hastily, wondering how she had displeased the capricious lady.

Although Ben Van Vechten would not have dared

to do a thing in direct opposition to his mother's commands, he was not ordinarily afraid of her, and he now listened impatiently, while she told him that Rosamond Leyton was not a fit associate for a young man like himself, "She was a sort of nobody, whom her brother had undertaken to educate," she said, "and though she might be rather pretty, she was low-born and vulgar, as any one could see."

Ben confessed to a deficiency of eyesight on that point, and then, as his mother showed no signs of changing the conversation, he left her abruptly, and sauntered off into the garden, where he came suddenly upon Rosamond, who was finishing the Ancient Mariner in the summer-house, her favorite resort.

"So we've met again," said he, "and a pretty lecture I've had on your account."

"Why on my account," asked Rosamond; and Ben, who never kept a thing to himself, told her in substance all his mother had said.

"She always wakes in the wrong time," said he, "and she saw me just as I was about to give you a little bit of a hug—so"—and he proceeded to demonstrate.

Rosamond's temper was up, and equally indignant at mother and son, she started to her feet, exclaiming, "I'd thank you, sir, to let me alone."

"Whew-ew," whistled Ben. "Spunky, ain't you. Now I rather like that. But pray don't burst a blood vessel. I've no notion of making love to you, if mother does think so. You are too small a girl."

"Too small a girl," repeated Rosamond, scornfully. "I'm *fourteen* to-morrow—quite too old to be insulted," and she darted away, followed by the merry laugh of the good-humored Ben.

Two years before Rosamond would not have been so excited, for though nearly fourteen she was in thought and feeling a very child, as was proved by her asking to kiss her benefactor's hand; but Mrs. Van Vechten's remarks, repeated to her by Ben, had wrought in her a change, and, in some respects, transformed her into a woman at once. She did not care so much for the liberties Ben had attempted to take, but his mother's words rankled in her bosom, awakening within her a feeling of bitter resentment; and when, next day, the lady's bell rang out its summons for her to come, she sat still upon the door-steps and gave no heed.

"Rosamond," said Mrs. Peters, "Mrs. Van Vechten is ringing for you."

"Let her ring, I'm not going to wait on her any more," and Rosamond returned to the book she was reading.

Meantime, flurried and impatient, the lady above stairs pulled at the bell-rope, growing more nervous and angry with every pull, until at last, as she heard her brother's step in the hall, she went out to him and said, "I wish you'd send that girl to me. I've rung at least fifty times; and dare say she's enticing Ben again. I knew it would be so."

Going hurriedly down the stairs, Mr. Browning sought out Rosamond and said to her, "My sister is ringing for you."

"I know it, sir;" and the brown eyes, which heretofore had seemed so soft and gentle, flashed upon him an expression which puzzled him.

"Then why do you not go?" he asked; and the young girl replied, "I shall not wait upon her any more."

"*Rosamond!*" said Mr. Browning. There was severity in the tone of his voice, and Rosamond roused at once.

"She says I am *vulgar*, and *low-born*, and have designs upon Ben," said she, "and it's a falsehood. My mother was as much a lady as she. I am *not* vulgar, and I hate Ben, and I won't stay here if I must wait on *her*. Shall I go away?"

If Rosamond left the life of the house went with her. This Mr. Browning knew; but man-like, he did not wish to be conquered by a woman, and after questioning her as to the nature of Mrs. Van Vechten's offence, he answered, "My sister says some foolish things, I know, but it is my request that you attend to her while she stays, and I expect to be obeyed."

That last word was unfortunate, for Rosamond had a strong will of her own, and tapping her little foot upon the ground, she said saucily, "And suppose you are not obeyed?"

He did not tell her she must leave Riverside, but he said, "You must answer for your disobedience to me, who have certainly some right to control you;" then, fearing that his own high temper might be tried more than he chose to have it, he walked away just in time to avoid hearing her say, "she cared less for him than for his sister!"

Rosamond was too impulsive not to repent bitterly of her conduct; and though she persisted in leaving Mrs. Van Vechten to herself, and refused to speak to Ben, whose face, in consequence, wore a most melancholy expression, she almost cried herself sick, and at last startled Mrs. Peters, just as that lady was stepping into bed, by declaring that she must see Mr. Browning before she slept.



Mr. Browning sat in his library, alone. He did not usually retire early, but this night he had cause for wakefulness. The burst of passion he had witnessed in his protégée had carried him back to a time when another than little Rosamond Leyton had laughed his wishes to scorn.

"And is it ever thus with them?" he said. "Are all women furies in disguise?—and Rosamond seemed so gentle, so good."

He did not hear the low knock on his door, for his thoughts were far away in the south-land, where he had learned his first lesson of womankind. Neither did he hear the light footfall upon the floor, but when a sweet, tearful voice said to him, "Mr. Browning, are you feeling so badly for me?" he started, and on a hassock at his feet saw Rosamond Leyton. The sight of her was unexpected, and it startled him for a moment, but soon recovering his composure, he said gently: "Why are you here? I supposed you were in bed."

Rosamond began to cry, and with her usual impetuosity replied, "I came to tell you how sorry I am for behaving so rudely to you. I do try to govern my temper so hard, but it sometimes gets the mastery. Won't you forgive me, sir? It wasn't Rosamond that acted so—it was a vile, wicked somebody else. Will you forgive me?" and in her dread that the coveted forgiveness might be withheld, she forgot that he was only *twenty-four*, and laid her head upon his knee, sobbing like a little child.

"Had *she* done like this, how different would my life have been," thought Mr. Browning, and involuntarily caressing the curly head, he was about to speak, when Rosamond interrupted him, saying

"I won't deceive you, Mr. Browning, and make you think I'm better than I am. I am sorry I acted so to you, but I don't believe I'm sorry about Mrs. Van Vechten. I don't like her, for she always treats me as though I were not near as good as she, and I can't wait on her any more. Must I? Oh, don't make me," and she looked beseechingly into his face.

He could not help respecting her for that inborn feeling, which would not permit herself to be trampled down, and though he felt intuitively that she was having her own way after all, he assured her of his forgiveness, and then added: "Mrs. Van Vechten will not require your services, for she received a letter to-night, saying her presence was needed at home, and she leaves us to-morrow.

"*And Ben?*" she asked—"does he go, too?"

"He accompanies his mother to New York," Mr. Browning said, "and I believe she intends leaving him there with a friend, until his school commences again."

In spite of herself, Rosamond rather liked Ben, and feeling that she was the cause of his banishment from Riverside, her sympathy was enlisted for him, and she said, "If I were not here, Ben would stay. Hadn't you rather send me away?"

"No, Rosamond, no; I need you here," was Mr. Browning's reply, and then as the clock struck eleven, he bade her leave him, saying it was time children like her were in bed.

As he had said, Mrs. Van Vechten was going away, and she came down to breakfast next morning in her traveling dress, appearing very unamiable, and looking very cross at Rosamond, with whom she finally parted without a word of reconciliation. Ben on the contrary

was all affability, and managed slyly to kiss her, telling her he should come there again in spite of his mother.

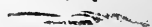
After their departure the household settled back into its usual monotonous way of living, with the exception that Rosámond, being promoted to the position of an equal, became, in many respects, the real mistress of Riverside, though Mrs. Peters nominally held the reins, and aside from superintending her work, built many castles of the future when her protégée would be a full grown woman and her master still young and handsome! .

CHAPTER IV.

ROSAMOND'S EDUCATION.

ONE year has passed away since Mrs. Van Vechten departed for the South, and up the locust lined avenue which leads to Riverside, the owner of the place is slowly riding. It is not pleasant going home to-night, and so he lingers by the way, wondering why it is that the absence of a *child* should make so much difference in one's feelings! During the year Rosamond had recited her lessons to him, but with many others he fancied no girl's education could be finished unless she were *sent away*—and two weeks before the night of which we write he had taken her himself to Atwater Seminary, a distance of more than two hundred miles, and then, with a sense of desolation for which he could not account, he had returned to his home, which was never so lonely before. There was no merry voice within the walls,—no tripping feet upon the stairs,—no soft, white hand to bathe his forehead when suffering from real or fancied headaches,—no slippers waiting by his chair,—no flowers on the mantle,—no bright face at the window,—no Rosamond at the door.

Of all this was he thinking that November afternoon and when at last he reached his house, he went straight to his library, hoping to find a letter there, telling him of her welfare. But letter there was none, and with a feeling of disappointment he started to the parlor.



The door was ajar and he caught glimpses of a cheerfully blazing fire within the grate. The shutters, too, were open and the curtains were put back just as they used to be when *she was there*. It seemed like the olden time, and with spirits somewhat enlivened he advanced into the room. His favorite chair stood before the fire, and so near to it that her head was leaning on its arm, sat a young girl. Her back was turned toward him, but he knew that form full well, and joyfully he cried, "Rosamond, how came you here?"

Amid her smiles and tears, Rosamond attempted to tell him the story of her grievances. She was homesick, and she could not learn half so much at the Atwater Seminary as at home—then, too, she hated the strait-jacket rules, and hated the lady-boarder, who pretended to be sick, and wouldn't let the school-girls breathe, especially Rosamond Leyton, for whom she seemed to have conceived a particular aversion.

Pleased as Mr. Browning was to have Rosamond with him again, he did not quite like her reasons for coming back, and he questioned her closely as to the cause of her sudden return.

"I shouldn't have come, perhaps," said Rosamond, "if that sick woman hadn't been so nervous and disagreeable. She paid enormous sums for her board, and so Mrs. Lindsey would hardly let us breathe for fear of disturbing her. My room was over hers, and I had to take off my shoes and walk on tip-toe, and even then she complained of me, saying I was rude and noisy, when I tried so hard to be still. I made some hateful remark about her in the hall, which she overheard, and when Mrs. Lindsey scolded me for it, saying she was a very wealthy lady from Florida, and accustomed to every attention at home, I said back

some pert things, I suppose, for she threatened to write and tell you, and so I thought I'd come and tell you myself."

There was a dizzy whirl in Mr. Browning's brain—a pallor about his lips—for a terrible suspicion had flashed upon him, and leaning forward, he said in a voice almost a whisper, "What was the Florida lady's name?"

"Potter, or Porter—yes, *Miss Porter*, that was it. But what is the matter? Are you sick?" Rosamond asked, as she saw how white he was.

"Only a sudden faintness. It will soon pass off," he said. "Tell me more of her. Did she see you? Were you near her?"

"No," answered Rosamond. "She was sick all the time I was there, and did not leave her room. The girls said, though, that she was rather pretty, but had big, black, evil-looking eyes. I don't know why it was, but I felt afraid of her—felt just as though she was my evil genius. I couldn't help it—but you *are* sick, Mr. Browning—you are pale as a ghost. Lie down upon the sofa, and let me bring the pillows, as I used to do."

She darted off in the direction of his sleeping-room, unconscious of the voice which called after her, asking if it were not dark in the hall, and bidding her take a light.

"But what does it matter?" he said, as he tottered to the sofa. *She* is not here. Atwater Seminary is two hundred miles away. She can't harm Rosamond now."

By this time Rosamond came with the pillows, which she arranged upon the sofa, making him lie down while she sat by, and laid her hand soothingly upon his burning forehead.

"We will have tea in here to-night," she said, "I told Mrs. Peters so, and I will make it myself. Do you feel any better?" and she brought her rosy face so near to his that he felt her warm breath upon his cheek.

"Yes, I am better," he replied, "but keep your hand upon my forehead. It assures me of your presence, when my eyes are shut."

So Rosamond sat beside him, and when Mrs. Peters came in to lay the cloth, she found them thus together. Smiling knowingly, she whispered to herself, "Nater is the same everywhere," and the good lady bustled in and out, bringing her choicest bits and richest cake in honor of her pet's return. That night, freed from boarding-school restraint, Rosamond slept soundly in her own pleasant chamber, but to Ralph Browning, pacing up and down his room, there came not a moment of unconsciousness. He could not forget how near he had been to one who had embittered his whole life—nor yet how near to her young Rosamond had been, and he shuddered as if the latter had escaped an unseen danger. Occasionally, too, the dread thought stole over him, "suppose she should come here, and with her eagle eyes discover what, if it exist at all, is hidden in the inmost recesses of my heart."

But of this he had little fear, and when the morning came he was himself again, and, save that it was haggard and pale, his face gave no token of the terrible night he had passed. But what should he do with Rosamond? This was the question which now perplexed him. He had no desire to send her from him again, neither would she have gone if he had—and he at last came to the very sensible conclusion that the school in his own village was quite as good as any,

and she accordingly became an attendant at the Granby Female Seminary. Here she remained for two years and a half, over which time we will pass silently and introduce her again to our readers, when she is nearly eighteen—a graduate—a belle—and the sunshine of Riverside.

CHAPTER V.

BROTHER AND SISTER.

DURING the time which had elapsed since Ben Van Vechten first made the acquaintance of Rosamond, he had not once been to Riverside, for failing to enter college, and overwhelmed with mortification at his failure, he had returned to Alabama, from which place he wrote to her occasionally, always addressing her as a little girl, and speaking of himself as a very ancient personage in comparison with herself. But that Rosamond was now no longer a little girl, was proved by her finely rounded figure, her intelligent face, her polished manners and self-reliant air. And Rosamond was beautiful, too—so beautiful that strangers invariably asked *who* she was, turning always for a second look, when told she was the adopted sister or daughter—the villagers hardly knew which—of the wealthy Mr. Browning. But whether she were the daughter or the sister of the man with whom she lived, she was in reality the mistress of his household, and those who at first slighted her as the child of a milliner, now gladly paid her homage as one who was to be the heir of Mr. Browning's wealth. He would never marry her, the wise ones thought—would never marry anybody—and so, with this understanding, he was free to talk, walk, and ride with her as often as he chose. He liked her, the people said, but did not love her, while Rosamond herself believed he almost

hated her, so strangely cold and harsh was his manner toward her at times.

This coldness had increased of late, and when the Lawries, who, next to Mr. Browning, were the most aristocratic people in the place, suggested that she should accompany them for a few weeks to the Springs, she was delighted with the plan, and nothing doubting that Mr. Browning would be glad to have her out of the way, she went to him for his consent. She found him in his library, apparently so absorbed in reading that he did not observe her approach until she stood between him and the light. Then he looked up quickly, and, as she fancied, an expression of displeasure passed over his face.

"Excuse me for disturbing you," she said, rather petulantly; "I have to break in upon your privacy if I would see you at all."

He gave her a searching glance, and then laying aside his book and folding his arms, said pleasantly, "I am at your service now, Miss Leyton. What is it you wish?"

Very briefly she stated her request, and then sitting down in the window, awaited his answer. It was not given immediately, and when he did speak, he said—"Rosamond, do you wish to go?"

"Of course I do," she replied, "I want to go where it is not as lonesome as I find it here."

"Lonesome, Rosamond, lonesome," he repeated, "Riverside has never been lonesome since——" he paused a moment and then added, "since you came here."

The shadow disappeared from Rosamond's face, as she replied—"I did not suppose you cared to have me here. I thought you did not like me."

--Not like you, Rosamond?" and over his fine features there came a look of pain, which increased as Rosamond continued:—"You are so cold at times, and shun me as it were; inventing excuses to drive me from you when you know I would rather stay."

"Oh, Rosamond," he groaned, "how mistaken you are. The world would be to me a blank were it not for you; and if my manner is sometimes cold and cruel, it is because stern duty demands it should be so. I cannot lay bare my secret heart to you of all others, but could you know me as I am, you would censure much, but pity more." He paused a moment, then, scarcely knowing what he said he continued—"Rosamond, we will understand each other. *I shall never marry—never can marry.* In your intercourse with me, will you always remember that?"

"Why, yes," answered Rosamond, puzzled to comprehend him. "I'll remember that you say so, but it is not likely you'll keep your word."

"I am not trifling with you," he said. "Marriage is not for *me*. There is a dreadful reason why I cannot marry, and if at times I am cold toward you, it is because—because——"

Rosamond's eyes were riveted upon his face;—darker and darker they grew, becoming at last almost black in their intensity. She was beginning to understand him, and coloring crimson, she answered bitterly, "I know what you would say, but you need have no fears, for I never aspired to that honor. Rosamond Leyton has yet to see the man she could love."

"Rosamond," and Mr. Browning's voice was so low, so mournful in its tone that it quelled the angry feelings in the young girl's bosom, and she offered no resistance when he came to her side and took her hand

in his, saying as he did so—"Listen to me. You came here a little girl, and at first I did not heed you, but you made your presence felt in various ways, until at last I thought I could not live without you. You are a young lady now—the world calls you beautiful. To me you are beautiful. Oh, *so* beautiful," and he laid one hand upon her shining hair, softly, tenderly, nay, proudly, as if she had been his child. "I am not old yet, and it would be natural that we should love each other, but we must not—we cannot."

"And lest I should love you too well, you have tried to make me hate you," interrupted Rosamond, trying in vain to release herself from his powerful grasp, and adding, "but you can spare yourself the trouble. I like you too well to hate you; but as I live, I would not marry you if I could. I mean what I say!"

He released her hand, and returning to his chair, laid his head upon the table, while she continued—"I know just about how well you like me—how necessary I am to your comfort, and since fate has decreed that we should be thrown together, let us contribute to each other's happiness as far as in us lies. I will think of you as a brother, if you like, and you shall treat me as a sister, until somebody takes me off your hands. Now, I can't say *I* shall never marry, for I verily believe I shall. Meantime, you must think of me just as you would if you had a wife. Is it a bargain, Mr. Browning?"

She spoke playfully, but he knew she was in earnest, and from his inmost soul he blessed her for having thus brought the conversation to a close. He could not tell her why he had said to her what he had—it was not what he intended to say, and he knew she was

in a measure deceived, but he could not explain to her now; he could not tell her that he trembled for himself far more than for her, and it was not for her then to know how much he loved her, nor how that love was wearing his life away because of its great sin. He was growing old now very fast. The shadows of years were on his brow, and Rosamond almost fancied she saw his brown locks turning white. She was a warm-hearted, impulsive girl, and going toward him, she parted from his forehead the hair streaked with gray, saying softly to him, "Shall it not be so? May I be your sister?"

"Yes, Rosamond, yes," was his answer; and then, wishing to bring him back to the point from which they started, Rosamond said abruptly—"And what of the Springs? Can I go?"

The descent was a rapid one, but it was what he needed, and lifting up his head, he replied, just as he had done before, "Do you want to go?"

"Not as much as I did when I thought you were angry, and if you would rather, I had quite as lief stay with you."

"Then stay," he said, "and we will have no more misunderstandings."

The next evening, as he sat alone in the parlor, a servant brought him a letter, the superscription of which made him reel, as if he would have fallen to the floor. It was nearly four years since he had seen that handwriting—he had hoped never to look upon it again—but it was there before his eyes, and she who wrote that letter was coming to Riverside—"would be there in a few days, Providence permitting. Do not commit suicide on my account," she wrote, "for I care as little as yourself to have our secret divulged, and unless I

find that you are after other *prey*, I shall keep my own counsel."

The letter dropped from his nerveless fingers—the objects in the room swam before his eyes, and like one on whom a crushing weight has fallen, he sat bewildered, until the voice of Rosamond aroused him, and fleeing to his chamber he locked the door, and then sat down to think. She was coming to Riverside, and wherefore? He did not wish for a reconciliation now—he would rather live there just as he was, with Rosamond.

"Nothing will escape her," he said; "those basilisk eyes will see everything—will ferret out my love for that fair young girl. Oh, Heaven, is there no escape!"

He heard the voice of Anna Lawrie in the yard. She was coming for Rosamond's decision, and quick as thought he rang the bell, bidding the servant who appeared to send Miss Leyton to him.

"Rosamond," he said, when she came to the door, "I have changed my mind. You must go to the Springs."

"But I'd rather stay at home—I do not wish to go," she said.

"I say you *must*. So tell Miss Lawrie you will," he answered, and his eyes flashed almost savagely upon her.

Rosamond waited for no more. She had discovered the impediment to his marrying. It was *hereditary insanity*, and she had seen the first signs of it in him herself! Magnanimously resolving never to tell a human being, nor let him be chained if she could help it, however furious he might become, she went down to Miss Lawrie, telling her she would go.

One week from that day was fixed upon for their departure, and during that time Rosamond was too much absorbed in dresses and finery to pay much heed to Mr. Browning. Of one thing she was sure, though—he was *crazy*; for what else made him stalk up and down the gravel-walk, his head bent forward, and his hands behind him, as if intently thinking. Once, when she saw him thus, she longed to go out to him, to tell him she knew his secret, and that she would never leave him, however unmanageable he should become! But his manner toward her now was so strange that she dared not, and she was almost as glad as himself when at last the morning came for her to go.

“Promise me one thing,” he said, as they stood together a moment alone. “Don’t write until you hear from me, and don’t come home until I send for you.”

“And suppose the Lawries come, what then?” she asked, and he replied, “No matter; stay until I write. Here are five hundred dollars in case of an emergency,” and he thrust a check into her hand. “Stop,” he continued, as the carriage came round—“did you put your clothes away where no one can see them, or are you taking them all with you?”

“Why no, why should I?” she answered. “Ain’t I coming back?”

“Yes, yes—Heaven only knows,” he said. “Oh, Rosamond, it may be I am parting with you forever, and at such a moment, is it a sin for you to kiss me? You asked to do so once. Will you do it now?”

“I will,” she replied, and she kissed, unhesitatingly, his quivering lips.

The Lawries were at the door—Mrs. Peters also—and forcing down his emotion, he bade her a calm good-by. The carriage rolled away, but ere its oc-

cupants were six miles from Riverside, every article of dress which had belonged to Rosamond had disappeared from her room, which presented the appearance of any ordinary bed-chamber, and when Mrs. Peters, in great alarm, came to Mr. Browning, asking what he supposed had become of them, he answered quietly —“I have put them in my private closet and locked them up!”

CHAPTER VI.

MARIE PORTER.

THE Hotels were crowded with visitors. Every apartment at — Hall, from basement to attic, was full, save two small rooms, eight by ten, so dingy and uncomfortable, that only in cases of emergency were they offered to guests. These, from necessity, were taken by the Lawries, but for Rosamond there was scarcely found a standing point, unless she were willing to share the apartment of a sick lady, who had graciously consented to receive any genteel, well-bred person, who looked as though they would be quiet and not rummage her things more than once a day !

“She was a very high-bred woman,” the obsequious attendant said, “and her room the best in the house ; she would not remain much longer, and when she was gone the young lady could have it alone, or share it with her companions. It contained two beds, of course, besides a few *nails* for dresses.”

“Oh, do take it,” whispered the younger Miss Lawrie, who was not yet thoroughly versed in the *pleasures* of a watering place, and who cast rueful glances at her cheerless *pen*, so different from her airy chamber at home.

So Rosamond’s trunks were taken to No. 20, whither she herself followed them. The first occupant, it would seem, was quite an invalid, for though it was four in the afternoon, she was still in bed. Great

pains, however, had evidently been taken with her toilet, and nothing could have been more perfect than the arrangement of her pillows—her hair—her wrapper, and the crimson shawl she wore about her shoulders. Rosamond bowed to her politely, and then, without noticing her particularly, went over to the side of the room she supposed was to be hers. She had just lain aside her hat when the lady said, "That open blind lets in too much light. Will you please shut it Miss—— I don't know what to call you."

"Miss Leyton," answered Rosamond, "and you are——"

"Miss Porter," returned the speaker.

"Rosamond started quickly, for she remembered the name, and looking for the first time directly at the lady, she met a pair of large black eyes fixed inquiringly upon her.

"Leyton—Leyton," repeated the lady, "where have I heard of you before?"

"At Atwater Seminary, perhaps," suggested Rosamond, a little doubtful as to the manner in which her intelligence would be received.

A shadow flitted over the lady's face, but it was soon succeeded by a smile, and she said graciously, "Oh, yes, I know. You annoyed me and I annoyed you. It was an even thing, and since we are thrown together again, we will not quarrel about the past. Ain't you going to close that blind? The light shines full in my face, and, as I did not sleep one wink last night, I am looking horridly to-day."

"Excuse me, madam," said Rosamond, "I was so taken by surprise that I forgot your request," and she proceeded to shut the blind.

This being done, she divested herself of her soiled

garments, washed her face, brushed her curls, and was about going in quest of her companions, when the lady asked if she had friends there. Rosamond replied that she had, at the same time explaining how uncomfortable they were.

"The hotel is full," said the lady, "and they all envy me my room; but if I pay for the best, I am surely entitled to the best. I shall not remain here long, however. Indeed, I did not expect to be here now, but sickness overtook me. I dare say I am the subject of many anxious thoughts to the person I am going to visit."

There was a half-exultant expression upon the lady's face as she uttered these last words, but in the darkened room, Rosamond did not observe it. She was sorry for one thus detained against her will, and leaning against the foot-board, she said, "You suffer a great deal from ill health, do you not? Have you always been an invalid?"

"Not always. I was very healthy once, but a great trouble came upon me, shocking my nervous system terribly, and since then I have never seen a well day. I was young when it occurred—about your age, I think. How old are you, Miss Leyton?"

"I am eighteen next October," was Rosamond's reply, and the lady continued, "I was older than that. Most nineteen. I am twenty-eight now."

Rosamond did not know *why* she said it, but she rejoined quickly, "Twenty-eight. So is Mr. Browning!"

"*Who?*" exclaimed the lady, the tone of her voice so sharp—so loud and earnest, that Rosamond was startled, and did not answer for an instant.

When she did, she said, "I beg your pardon; it is Mr. Browning who is twenty-eight."

"Ah, yes, I did not quite understand you. I'm a little hard of hearing. Who is Mr. Browning?"

The voice had assumed its usually soft, smooth tone, and Rosamond could not see the rapid beatings of the heart, nor the eager curiosity lurking in the glittering black eyes. The lady *seemed* indifferent, and smoothed carelessly the rich Valenciennes lace, which edged the sleeve of her cambric wrapper.

"Did you tell me who Mr. Browning was, dear?" and the black eyes wandered over the counterpane, looking everywhere but at Rosamond, so fearful was their owner lest they should betray the interest she felt in the answer.

"Mr. Browning," said Rosamond, "is—is—I hardly know what he is to me. I went to his house to live when I was a little, friendless orphan, and he very kindly educated me, and made me what I am. I live with him still at Riverside."

"Ye-es—Riverside—beau-ti-ful name—his country-seat—I—sup-pose," the words dropped syllable by syllable from the white lips, but there was no quiver in the voice—no ruffle upon her face.

Raising herself upon her elbow, the lady continued, "Pray don't think me fidgety, but won't you please open that shutter. I did not think it would be so dark. There, that's a good girl. Now, come and sit by me on the bed, and tell me of Riverside. Put your feet in the chair, or take this pillow. There, turn a little more to the light. I like to see people when they talk to me."

Rosamond complied with each request, and then, never dreaming of the close examination to which her face was subjected, she began to speak of her beautiful home—describing it minutely, and dwelling somewhat at length upon the virtues of its owner.

"You like him very much," the lady said, nodding a little affirmative nod to her own question.

"Yes, very—very much," was Rosamond's answer; and the lady continued, "And *Mrs. Browning*? Do you like her, too?"

"There is no *Mrs. Browning*," returned Rosamond, adding quickly, as she saw in her auditor's face an expression she did not understand, "but it is perfectly proper I should live there, for *Mrs. Peters*, the house-keeper, has charge of me."

"Perhaps, then, he will marry you," and the jeweled hands worked nervously under the crimson shawl.

"Oh, no, he won't," said Rosamond, decidedly, "he's too old for me. Why, his hair is turning gray!"

"That's nothing," answered the lady, a little sharply. "Everybody's hair turns early now-a-days. Sarah found three or four silver threads in mine, this morning. Miss Leyton, don't you love Mr. Browning?"

"Why, yes," Rosamond began, and the face upon the pillow assumed a dark and almost fiendish expression. "Why, yes, I love him as a brother, but nothing else. I respect him for his goodness, but it would be impossible to love him with a marrying love."

The fierce expression passed away, and Miss Porter was about to speak when Anna Lawrie sent for Rosamond, who excused herself and left the room, thinking that, after all, she should like her old enemy of At-water Seminary very much.

Meantime "the enemy" had buried her face in her pillows, and clenching her blue veined fists, struck at the empty air, just as she would have struck at the owner of Riverside had he been standing there.

"Fine time he has of it," she muttered, "living there

with her, and she so young and beautiful. I could have strangled her—the jade!—when she sat here talking so enthusiastically to *me, of him!* And she loves him, too. I know she does, though she don't know it herself. But I must be wary. I must seem to like this girl—must win her confidence—so I can probe her heart to its core, and if I find they love each other!”—she paused a moment, then grinding her teeth together, added slowly, as if the sound of her voice were musical and sweet, “Marie Porter will be avenged!”

That strange woman could be a demon or an angel, and as the latter character suited her just now, Rosamond, on her return to her room, found her all gentleness and love.

That night, when all around the house was still, the full moon shone down upon a scene which would have chilled the blood of Ralph Browning and made his heart stand still. Upon a single bedstead near the window Rosamond Leyton lay calmly sleeping—her brown curls floating o'er the pillow—her cheeks flushed with health and beauty—her lips slightly apart and her slender hands folded gracefully upon her bosom. Over her a fierce woman bent—her long, black hair streaming down her back—her eyes blazing with passion—her face the impersonation of malignity and hate; and there she stood, a vulture watching a harmless dove. Rosamond was dreaming of her home, and the ogress, standing near heard her murmur, “dear Mr. Browning.”

For a moment Marie Porter stood immovable—then gliding back to her own couch, she whispered, “It is as I believed, and now if *he* loves *her*. the time I've waited for so long has come.”

All that night she lay awake, burning with excitement and thirsting for revenge, and when the morning came, the illness was not feigned which kept her in her bed and wrung from her cries of pain. She was really suffering now, and during the next few days, Rosamond stayed almost constantly at her side, administering to her wants, and caring for her so tenderly that hatred died out of the woman's heart, and she pitied the fair young girl, for in those few days she had learned what Rosamond did not know herself, though she was gradually waking up to it now. It was a long time since she had been separated from Mr. Browning, and she missed him so much, following him in fancy through the day, and at night wondering if he were thinking of her, and wishing he could hear the sound of her voice singing to him as she was wont to do when the twilight was over the earth. Anon there crept into her heart a feeling she could not define—a feverish longing to be where he was—a sense of desolation and terrible pain when she thought of his insanity, and the long, dreary years which might ensue when he would lose all knowledge of her. She did not care to talk so much of him now, but Miss Porter cared to have her, and caressingly winning the girl's confidence, learned almost every thing—learned that there was an impediment to his marrying, and that Rosamond believed that impediment to be *hereditary insanity*—learned that he was often fitful and gloomy, treating his ward sometimes with coldness, and again with the utmost tenderness. Of the interview in the library Rosamond did not tell, but she told of everything else—of his refusing to let her come to the Springs and then compelling her, against her will, to go; and Marie Porter, holding the little hands in hers—and

listening to the story, read it all, and read it aright, gloating over the anguish she knew it cost Ralph Browning to see that beautiful girl each day and know he must not win her.

"But I pity *her*," she said, "for there is coming to her a terrible awakening."

Then, for no other reason than a thirst for excitement, she longed to see that awakening, and one day when they sat together alone, she took Rosamond's hand in hers, and examining its scarcely legible lines, said, half playfully, half seriously, "Rosamond, people have called me a fortune-teller. I inherited the gift from my grandmother, and though I do not pretend to much skill, I can surely read your destiny. You *love* Mr. Browning. I have known that all along. You think of him by day—you dream of him by night, and no thought is half so sweet as the thought of going home to him. But, Rosamond, you will not marry him. There is an impediment, as you say, but not insanity. I cannot tell you what it is, but I can see," and she bent nearer to the hand which trembled in her own. "I can see that for you to marry him, or—mark me, Rosamond—for you even to love him, is a most wicked thing—a dreadful sin in the sight of Heaven, and you must forget him—will you?"

Rosamond had laid her face upon the bed and was sobbing hysterically, for Miss Porter's manner frightened her even more than her words. In reply to the question, "Will you?" she at last answered passionately, "*No, I won't!*" It is *not* wicked to love him as I do. I am his *sister*, nothing more."

Miss Porter's lip curled scornfully a moment, and then she said, "Let me tell you the story of *my* life, shall I?"

No answer from Rosamond, and the lady continued : "When I was about your age I fancied I loved a man who, I think, must have been much like Mr. Browning——"

"No, no," interrupted Rosamond. "Nobody was ever like Mr. Browning. I don't want to hear the story. I don't want anything but to go home."

I will not tell her until it's more necessary, thought Miss Porter, but if I mistake not she will go home much sooner than she anticipates. And she was right, for on that very night Mr. Browning sat reading a letter which ran as follows :

"I find myself so happy with *your little* Rosamond, who chances to be my room-mate, that I have postponed my visit to Riverside until some future time, which, if you continue neutral, may never come—but the moment you trespass on forbidden ground, or breathe a word of love into *her* ear—beware! She loves *you*. I have found that out, and I tell it because I know it will not make your life more happy, or your punishment easier to bear!"

He did not shriek—he did not faint—he did not move—but from between his teeth two words came like a burning hiss, "Curse her!" Then, seizing his pen, he dashed off a few lines, bidding Rosamond "not to delay a single moment, but to come home at once."

"She knows it all," he said, "and now, if *she* comes here, it will not be much worse. I can but die, let what will happen."

This letter took Rosamond and the Lawries by surprise but not so Miss Porter. She expected it, and when she saw how eager Rosamond was to go, she smiled a hard bitter smile, and said, "I've a half a mind to go with you."

"What! where? To *Riverside*?" asked Rosamond, suspending her preparations for a moment, and hardly knowing whether she were pleased or not.

"Yes, to *Riverside*," returned Miss Porter, "though on the whole, I think I'd better not. Mr. Browning may not care to see me. If he does, you can write and let me know. Give him my love, and say that if you had not described him as so incorrigible an old bach, I might be coming there to try my powers upon him. I am *irresistible in my diamonds*. Be sure and tell him that; and stay, Rosamond, I must give you some little token of my affection. What shall it be?" and she feigned to be thinking.

Most cruel must her thoughts have been, and even she hesitated a moment ere she could bring herself to such an act. Then with a contemptuous "Pshaw!" she arose and opening her jewel box took from a private drawer a plain gold ring, bearing date nine years back, and having inscribed upon it simply her name "*Marie*." This she brought to Rosamond, saying, "I can't wear it now;—my hands are too thin and bony, but it just fits you,—see—" and she placed it upon the third finger of Rosamond's left hand!

Rosamond thanked her, admired the chaste beauty of the ring and then went on with her packing, while the wicked woman seated herself by the window and leaning her head upon her hands tried to quiet the voice of conscience which cried out against the deed she had done.

"It does not matter," she thought. "That tie was severed years ago,—by his own act, too. The ring shall go. But will he see it! Men do not always observe such things," and then, lest he should not quaff the cup of bitterness prepared for him, she wrote on a

tiny sheet of gilt-edged paper, "Look on Rosamond's third finger!"

This she carefully sealed and gave to Rosamond, bidding her hand it to Mr. Browning, and saying in answer to her look of inquiry, "It is about a little matter concerning yourself. He can show it to you, if he thinks proper!"

"The omnibus, Miss, for the cars," cried a servant at the door, and with a hurried good-bye to her friends, Rosamond departed and was soon on her way to Riverside.

CHAPTER VII.

MAKING LOVE.

AN accident had occurred to the downward train, and Rosamond was detained upon the road for a long time, so that it was already dark when she reached the Granby depot. Wishing to surprise Mr. Browning she started for home on foot, leaving her trunks in charge of the baggage master. All around the house was still, and stepping into the hall she was about passing up the stairs, when the parlor door suddenly opened, throwing a glare of light upon her face. The same instant some one caught her round the neck, and kissing her twice, only released her when she exclaimed, "*Mr. Browning*, I am surprised at you!"

"*Mr. Browning! Thunder!* Just as though I was my uncle!" cried a familiar voice, and looking at the speaker, Rosamond recognized *Ben Van Vechten!* He had come to Riverside the day previous, he said, and hearing she was expected, had waited at the depot four mortal hours, and then returned in disgust.

"But how did you know me?" she asked, and he replied, "By your daguerreotype, of course. There is but one such beautiful face in the whole world."

He was disposed to be complimentary, and Rosamond was not sorry when his mother appeared, for in her presence he was tolerably reserved. Mrs. Van Vechten greeted Rosamond politely, but the old hauteur was there, and her manner seemed to say, "If

you are educated and refined, I can't forget that you were once my waiting-maid."

"Where is Mr. Browning?" asked Rosamond, and Ben replied, "Oh, up in his den having the shakes. He mopes there all the time. Can't you break him of the blues?"

"I'll go and try," answered Rosamond, and she started up the stairs, followed by Ben, whose mother called him back, bidding him, in a low voice, stay where he was, and not make a fool of himself.

She could trust her *brother*, but not her *son*, and she thus did the former the greatest favor she could have done—she let him meet young Rosamond Leyton alone. The evening was quite chilly for July, and as, since the receipt of Miss Porter's note, Mr. Browning had seemed rather agueish, there was a fire burning in the grate, and it cast its shadows upon him as he sat in his accustomed chair. His back was toward the door, and he knew nothing of Rosamond's return until two soft, white hands were placed before his eyes, and a voice which tried to be unnatural, said, "Guess who I am."

"Rosamond—darling—have you come back to me again?" he exclaimed, and starting up, he wound his arm about her, and looked into her face, expecting, momentarily, to hear her say, "Yes, I know it all."

But Rosamond did not say so. She merely told him how glad she was to be at home once more, in her delight forgetting that Marie Porter had said she loved the man who held her closely to his side and smoothed her wavy hair even while his heart throbbed painfully with memories of the past and trembled for the future. He longed to speak of her room-mate, but he dared not betray his knowledge of her existence,

and he sat there waiting, yet dreading to near the hated name.

"Did you room alone?" he asked at last, and now remembering the words, "You do love him," Rosamond moved quickly from his side. "She does know," he thought, and a silent moan of anguish died upon his lips. But Rosamond did not know—the movement was actuated by mere maidenly reserve, and sitting down directly opposite him, she told him of Miss Porter, whom she said she liked so well.

"How much of an invalid is she?" asked Mr. Browning, when he could trust his voice to speak.

"Her health is miserable," returned Rosamond. She has heart disease, and her waiting-maid told me she was liable to die at any time if unusually excited."

It might have been because Rosamond was there that Mr. Browning thought the room was brighter than it had been before, and quite calmly he listened while she told him more of her new friend.

"She seemed so interested in you, and in Riverside," said Rosamond, "and even proposed coming home with me——"

Mr. Browning started suddenly, and as suddenly a coal snapped out upon the carpet. This was an excuse for his movement, and Rosamond continued, "She thought, though, you might not care to see her, being a stranger, but she sent you *her love*, and——. You are cold, ain't you, Mr. Browning? You shiver like a leaf. Ben said you'd had the ague."

Rosamond closed the door and commenced again. "Where was I? Oh, I know. She said if you were not a confirmed bachelor she would try her powers on you. '*She was irresistible in her diamonds*,' she bade

me tell you. But *have* you an ague chill, really? or what makes your teeth chatter so? Shall I ring for more coal?"

"No, Rosamond, no. Fire does not warm me; I shall be better soon."

Rosamond pitied him, he looked so white and seemed to be suffering so much, and she remained silent for a time. Then remembering the note, she handed it to him, and turning toward the fire, stooped down to fix a bit of coal which was in danger of dropping from the grate. While in this attitude a cry between a howl of rage and a moan of anguish fell upon her ear—her shoulders were grasped by powerful hands, and looking up she saw Mr. Browning, his face distorted with passion and his flashing eyes riveted upon the *ring* glittering in the firelight. Seizing her hand he wrenched it from her finger, and glanced at the name—then, swift as thought, placed it upon the marble hearth, and crushed it with his heel.

"It's mine—you've broken it," cried Rosamond, but he did not heed her, and gathering up the pieces, he hurled them into the grate—then, pale as ashes, sank panting into the nearest chair.

Rosamond was thunder-struck. She did not suppose he had had time to read the note, and never dreaming there was any connection between that and his strange conduct, she believed him to be raving mad, and her first impulse was to fly. Her second thought, however, was, "I will not leave him. He has these fits often, now, I know, and that is why he sent for me. He knew I could quiet him, and I will."

So Rosamond stayed, succeeding so far in soothing him, that his eyes lost their savage gleam, and were suffused with a look of unnatural tenderness when they

rested on her face. He did not ask her now she came by the ring for he knew it had been sent as an insult to him, and he felt a glow of satisfaction in knowing that it was blackening on the grate. Ben's voice was now heard in the hall, asking if they intended staying there all night, and in a whisper Mr. Browning bade Rosamond go down and apologize for him. She accordingly descended to the parlor, telling Mrs. Van Vechten that her brother was too much indisposed to come down, and wished to be excused. Mrs. Van Vechten bowed coolly, and taking a book of prints, busied herself for awhile in examining them; then the book dropped from her hand—her head fell back—her mouth fell open, and Ben, who was anxiously watching her, knew by unmistakable sounds that she was fast asleep. It was now his time, and faithfully did he improve it, devoting himself so assiduously to Rosamond, that she was glad when a *snore*, louder and more prolonged than any which had preceded it started the lady herself, and produced symptoms of returning consciousness.

The next day, and the next, it was the same, and at the expiration of a week, Ben had determined either to marry Rosamond Leyton, or go to the *Crimean War*, this last being the bugbear with which he intended frightening his mother into a consent. He hardly dared disobey her openly for fear of disinherittance, and he would rather she should express her willingness to receive Miss Leyton as her daughter. He accordingly startled her one day by asking her to sanction his intended proposal to the young girl. Nothing could exceed Mrs. Van Vechten's amazement and contempt. She would never consent, and if Ben persisted in making so disgraceful an alliance, she would disinherit him.

at once. Ben knew she was in earnest, and so fell back upon the Crimean war as a last resort. "He would go immediately--would start that very day for New York--he had money enough to carry him there," and he painted so vividly "death on a distant battle-field, with a ferocious *Russian* rifling his trousers' pocket," that his mother began to cry, though she still refused to relent.

"Choose, mother, choose," said he. "It's almost car time--Rosamond or the war," and he drew on his heavy boots.

"Oh, Benjamin, you will kill me dead."

"I know it. I mean to. Rosamond or the war!" and he buttoned up his coat preparatory to a start.

"Do, Ben, listen to reason."

"I won't--I won't;--Rosamond or the war! I shall rush into the thickest of the fight, and be killed the first fire, of course, and black is *so* unbecoming to you."

"Stop, I entreat. You know you are afraid of cannons;" this was said beseechingly.

"Thunder, mother! No, I ain't! Rosamond or the war--choose quick. I hear the whistle at East Granby."

He left the room--went down the stairs, out at the door, through the yard, and out into the avenue, while his distracted mother looked after him through blinding tears. She knew how determined he was when once his mind was made up, and she feared his present excitement would last until he was fairly shipped, and it was too late to return. He would never fight, she was sure, and at the first battle-sound he would fly, and be hung as a deserter, no doubt! This touched her pride. She would rather people should say of her boy

that he married a milliner's daughter than that he was hung, and hurrying to the window just as Ben looked back, hoping for a signal, she waved her hand for him to return, calling out at the top of her voice, "I relent—I relent."

"I knew the *Crimea* would fetch her," said Ben; "lucky I thought of that," and without going to his mother at all, he sought out Rosamond. Half an hour later he astonished the former by rushing into her presence, and exclaiming, "She's refused me, mother; and she meant it, too. Oh, *I shall die*—I know I shall. Oh, oh, oh!" and Ben rolled on the floor in his frantic grief. As nearly as she could, Mrs. Van Vechten learned the particulars of his interview with Rosamond, and, though at first secretly pleased that he had been refused, she felt a very little piqued that her son should thus be dishonored, and when she saw how wretched it had made him, her feelings were enlisted in his behalf, and she tried to soothe him by saying that her brother had a great deal of influence with Rosamond, and they would refer the matter to him.

"Go now, mother. Don't wait a minute," pleaded Ben, and Mrs. Van Vechten started for her brother's library.

She found him alone, and disclosed the object of her visit at once. Rosamond had refused her son, who, in consequence, was nearly distracted, and threatened going to the Crimean war—a threat she knew he would execute unless her brother persuaded Rosamond to revoke her decision, and think again.

Mr. Browning turned as white as marble, but his sister was too much absorbed in her own matters to heed his emotions, and she continued—

"Of course it will be mortifying to us all to have

her in the family, and maybe Ben will get over it; but they must be engaged somehow, or he'll go away. I'll send her up to you immediately," and she hurriedly left the room in quest of Rosamond. For a moment Mr. Browning sat like one stupefied; then, covering his face with his hands, he moaned, "Must *this* come upon me, too? Must I, who love her so madly, bid her marry another? And yet what does it matter? She can never be mine—and if she marries Ben I can keep them with me always, and that vile woman will have no cause for annoying me. She said Rosamond loved me, but I pray Heaven that may not be so."

A light tread echoed in the hall, and with each fall of those little feet, Ralph Browning's heart throbbed painfully. Another moment and Rosamond was there with him—her cheeks flushed—her eyelashes wet with tears, and her whole manner betrayed an unusual degree of excitement.

"I understand from your sister," said she, "that you wish me to marry *Ben*, or leave your house. I will do the latter, but the former—never! Shall I consider our interview at an end?"

She turned to leave the room, but Mr. Browning caught her dress, exclaiming, "Stay, Rosamond, and hear me. I never uttered such words to Mrs. Van Vechten. I do not wish you to marry Ben, unless you love him. Do you love him, Rosamond? Do you love anybody?"

This was not what he intended to say—but he had said it, and now he waited for her answer. To the first question it came in a decided "No, I do not love him," and to the last it came in burning blushes, stealing over her cheek—her forehead—her neck, and speaking in her downcast eye. She had never believed that

she did love her guardian, until told that he wished her to marry another, when it burst upon her in all its force, and she could no more conceal it now than she could stop the rapid beatings of her heart. He saw it all in her tell-tale face, and forgetting everything, he wound his arms around her, and drawing her to his side, whispered in her ear, "Darling Rosamond, say that you love me. Let me hear that assurance once, and I shall be almost willing to die."

"Ladies do not often confess an attachment until sure it is returned," was Rosamond's answer, and doubly forgetful now of all the dreary past, Ralph Browning poured into her ear hot, burning words of love—hugging her closer and closer to him until through the open window came the sound of Mr. Peters's voice calling to the stranger girl who had that morning entered service at Riverside as a waiting-maid in general. *Maria* was the name, and as the ominous word fell upon Mr. Browning's ear, he started, and pushing Rosamond from him, turned his face away so she could not see the expression of mute despair settling down upon it. Sinking upon the lounge he buried his face in its cushions while Rosamond looked curiously upon him, feeling sure that she knew what it was that so affected him. He had told her of his love—had said that she was dearer to him than his life, and in confessing this he had forgotten the dark shadow upon his life, and it was the dread of telling it to her—the pain of saying "I love you, but you cannot be my wife," which affected him so strangely. But she knew it all, and she longed to assure him of her sympathy. At last when he seemed to be more calm, she stole up to him, and kneeling at his side bent over him so that her bright hair mingled with his own.

"Mr. Browning," she whispered softly, "*I know your secret*, and I do not love you less."

"*You, Rosamond, you know it!*" he exclaimed, gazing fixedly at her. "It cannot be. You would never do as you have done."

"But I do know it," she continued, taking both his hands in hers, and looking him steadily in the eye, by way of controlling him, should he be seized with a sudden attack, "I know exactly what it is, and though it will prevent me from being your wife, it will not prevent me from loving you just the same, or from living with you either. I shall stay here always—and—and—pardon me, Mr. Browning, but when you get furious, as you sometimes do, I can quiet you better than any one else, and it may be, the world will never need to know you are a *madman!*"

Mr. Browning looked searchingly into her innocent eyes, and then, in spite of himself, he laughed aloud. He understood why she should think him a madman, and though he repented of it afterward, he hastened to undeceive her now. "As I hope to see another day, it is not that," he said. "It ~~is~~ far worse than insanity; and, Rosamond, though it breaks my heart to say it, it is wicked for me to talk of love to you, and you must not remember what I said. You must crush every tender thought of me. You must forget me—nay, more—you must *hate* me. Will you, Rosamond?"

"No—no—no," she cried, and laying her face in his lap, she burst into a passionate flood of tears.

"Leave me," he whispered, "or I *shall* go mad, for I know I am the cause of this distress."

There was decision in the tones of his voice, and it stilled the tumult in Rosamond's bosom. Rising to her feet, she said calmly, "I will go, but I cannot forget

that you deceived me. You have wrung from me a confession of my love, only to throw it back upon me as a priceless thing."

Not thus would he part with her, and grasping her arm, he began, "Heaven knows how much more than my very life I love you——"

He did not finish the sentence, for through the air a small, dark object came, and, missing its aim, dropped upon the hearth, where it was broken in a hundred pieces. It was a vase which stood upon the table in the hall, and Ben Van Vechten's was the hand that threw it! Impatient at the delay, he had come up in time to hear his uncle's last words, which aroused his Southern blood at once, and seizing the vase, he hurled it at the offender's head—then, rushing down the stairs, he burst upon his mother with "Great thunder! mother: Uncle Ralph is making love to Rosamond himself, and she likes it too. I saw it with my own eyes! I'll hang myself in the barn, or go to the Crimean war!" and Ben bounded up and down like an India-rubber ball. Suddenly remembering that another train was due ere long, he darted out of the house, followed by his distracted mother, who, divining his intention, ran swiftly after him, imploring him to return. Pausing for a moment, as he struck into the highway, he called out, "Good-by, mother. I've only one choice left—WAR! Give my love to Rosamond, and tell her I shall die like a hero. You needn't wear black, if you don't want to. Good-by."

He turned the corner—he had started for the *war*—and mentally resolving to follow him in the next train, Mrs. Van Vechten returned to the house, and sought her brother

"Ralpn," she began sternly, "have you asked of love to Rosamond?"

Mr. Browning had borne so much that nothing startled him now, and returning her glance unflinchingly, he replied, "I have."

"How, then—is Marie dead?" the lady asked.

"Not to my knowledge—but hist," was the reply, as Mr. Browning nodded toward the hall, where a rustling movement was heard.

It was the *new girl*, coming with dust-pan and brush to remove the fragments of the vase, though how she knew they were there, was a question she alone could answer. For a single instant her dull, gray eye shot a gleam of intelligence at the occupants of the room, and then assuming her usual appearance, she did what she came to do, and departed. When they were again alone, Mrs. Van Vechten demanded an explanation of her brother, who gave it unhesitatingly. Cold-hearted as she always seemed, Mrs. Van Vechten had some kind feelings left, and, touched by her brother's tale of suffering, she gave him no word of reproach, and even unbent herself to say that a brighter day might come to him yet. Then she spoke of Ben, announcing her determination of following him that night. To this plan Mr. Browning offered no remonstrance, and when the night express left the Granby station, it carried with it Mrs. Van Vechten, in pursuit of the runaway Ben.

CHAPTER VIII.

NEWS.

NEARLY two weeks had passed away since the exciting scene in Mr. Browning's library, and during that time Rosamond had kept herself aloof from her guardian, meeting him only at the table, where she maintained toward him a perfectly respectful but rather freezing manner. She was deeply mortified to think he had won from her a confession of her love, and then told her how useless—nay, worse—how wicked it was for her to think of him. She knew that he suffered intensely, but she resolutely left him to suffer alone, and he would rather it should be so. Life was growing more and more a wearisome burden, and when, just one week after the library interview, he received a note in the well-remembered handwriting, he asked that he might die and forget his grief. The letter was dated at the Springs, where Miss Porter was still staying, though she said she intended starting the next day for Cuyler, a little out-of-the-way place on the lake, where there was but little company, and she could be quiet and recruit her nervous system. The latter had been terribly shocked, she said, by hearing of his recent attempt at making love to Rosamond Leyton! "Indeed," she wrote, "it is to this very love-making that you owe this letter from me, as I deem it my duty to keep continually before your mind the fact that *I am still alive.*"

With a blanched cheek Mr. Browning read this letter through—then tore it into fragments, wondering much who gave her the information. There were no *spies* about his premises. Rosamond would not do it, and it must have been his sister, though why she should thus wish to annoy him he did not know, when she, more than any one else, had been instrumental in placing him where he was. Once he thought of telling Rosamond all, but he shrank from this, for she would leave his house, he knew, and, though she might never again speak kindly to him, he would rather feel that she was there.

And so another dreary week went by, and then one morning there came to him tidings which stopped for an instant the pulsations of his heart, and sent through his frame a thrill so benumbing and intense that at first pity and horror were the only emotions of which he seemed capable. It came to him in a newspaper paragraph, which in substance was as follows :

“ A sad catastrophe occurred on Thursday afternoon at Cuyler, a little place upon the lake, which of late has been somewhat frequented during the summer months. Three ladies and one gentleman went out in a small pleasure-boat which is kept for the accommodation of the guests. They had not been gone very long when a sudden thunder-gust came on, accompanied by a violent wind, and the owner of the skiff, feeling some alarm for the safety of the party, went down to the landing just in time to see the boat make a few mad plunges with the waves, and then capsize at the distance of nearly half a mile from the shore.

“ Every possible effort was made to save the unfortunate pleasure-seekers, but in vain ; they disappeared from view long before a boat could reach them. One

of the bodies has not yet been recovered. It is that of a Miss Porter, from Florida. She had reached Cuyler only the day previous, and was unaccompanied by a single friend, save a waiting-maid, who seems overwhelmed with grief at the loss of her mistress."

This, then, was the announcement which so affected Ralph Browning, blotting out for a moment the wretched past, and taking him back to the long ago when he first knew Marie Porter and fancied that he loved her. She was *dead* now—*dead*. Many a time he whispered that word to himself, and with each repetition the wish grew strong within him—not that she were living, but that while living he had not hated her so bitterly, and with the softened feeling which death will always bring, he blamed himself far more than he did her. There had been wrong on both sides, but he would rather now that she had been reconciled to him ere she found that watery grave. Hand in hand with these reflections came another thought; a bewildering, intoxicating thought. He was *free* at last—free to *love*—to *worship*—to *marry* Rosamond.

"And I will go to her at once," he said, after the first hour had been given to the dead; "I will tell her all the truth."

He arose to leave the room, but something stayed him there, and whispered in his ear, "There may be some mistake. Cuyler is not far away. Go there first and investigate."

For him to will was to do, and telling Mrs. Peters he should be absent from home for a time, he started immediately for Cuyler, which he reached near the close of the day. Calm and beautiful looked the waters of the lake on that summer afternoon, and if within their caverns the ill-fated Marie slept, they kept over her an

unruffled watch and told no tales of her last dying wail to the careworn, haggard man who stood upon the sandy beach, where they said that she embarked, and listened attentively while they told him how gay she seemed that day, and how jestingly she spoke of the dark thunder-head which even then was mounting the western horizon. They had tried in vain to find her, and it was probable she had sunk into one of the unfathomable holes with which the lake was said by some to abound. Sarah, the waiting-maid, wept passionately, showing that the deceased must have had some good qualities, or she could not thus have attached a servant to her.

Looking upon Mr. Browning as a friend of her late mistress, she relied on him for counsel, and when he advised her immediate return to Florida, she readily consented, and started on the same day that he turned his face toward Riverside. They had said to him, "If we find her, shall we send her to your place?" and with an involuntary shudder he had answered, "No—oh, no. You must apprise me of it by letter, as also her Florida friends—but bury her quietly here."

They promised compliance with his wishes, and feeling that a load was off his mind, he started at once for home. Certainty now was doubly sure. Marie was dead, and as this conviction became more and more fixed upon his mind, he began to experience a dread of telling Rosamond all. Why need she know of it, when the telling it would throw much censure on himself. She was not a great newspaper reader—she had not seen the paragraph, and would not see it. He could tell her that the obstacle to his happiness had been removed—that 'twas no longer a sin for him to think of

her or seek to make her his wife. All this he would say to her, but nothing more.

And all this he did say to her in the summer-house at the foot of the garden, where he found her just as the sun was setting. And Rosamond listened eagerly—never questioning him of the past, or caring to hear of it. She was satisfied to know that she might love him now, and with his arm around her, she sat there alone with him until the August moon was high up in the heavens. He called her his “sunshine”—his “light”—his “life,” and pushing the silken curls from off her childish brow, kissed her again and again, telling her she should be his wife when the twentieth day of November came. That was his twenty-ninth birthday and looking into her girlish face, he asked her if he were not too old. He knew she would tell him *no*, and she did, lovingly caressing his grayish hair.

“He had grown young since he sat there,” she said, and so, indeed, he had, and the rejuvenating process continued day after day, until the villagers laughingly said that his approaching marriage had put him back ten years. It was known to all the town’s folks now, and unlike most other matches, was pronounced a suitable one. Even Mrs. Van Vechten, who had found Ben at Lovejoy’s Hotel, and still remained with him in New York, wrote to her brother a kind of congratulatory letter, mingled with sickly sentimental regrets for the “heart-broken, deserted and now departed Marie.” It was doubtful whether she came up to the wedding or not, she said, as Ben had positively refused to come, or to leave the city either, and kept her constantly on the watch lest he should elope with a second-rate actress at Laura Keene’s theater.

Rosamond laughed heartily when Mr. Browning told

her of this sudden change in Ben, and then with a sigh as she thought how many times his soft, good-natured heart would probably be wrung, she went back to the preparations for her bridal, which were on a magnificent scale. They were going to Europe—they would spend the winter in Paris, and as Mr. Browning had several influential acquaintances there, they would of course see some society, and he resolved that his bride should be inferior to none in point of dress, as she was to none in point of beauty. Everything which love could devise or money procure was purchased for her, and the elegance of her outfit was for a long time the only theme of village gossip.

Among the members of the household none seemed more interested in the preparations than the girl Maria, who has before been incidentally mentioned. Her dull eyes lighted up with each new article of dress, and she suddenly displayed so much taste in everything pertaining to a lady's toilet, that Rosamond was delighted and kept her constantly with her, devising this new thing and that, all of which were invariably tried on and submitted to the inspection of Mr. Browning, who was sure to approve whatever his Rosamond wore. And thus gaily sped the halcyon hours, bringing at last the fading leaf and the wailing October winds; but to Rosamond, basking in the sunlight of love, there came no warning note to tell her of the dark November days which were hurrying swiftly on.

CHAPTER IX.

THE GUEST AT RIVERSIDE.

THE November days had come. The satin dress was made—the bridal veil sent home—the wreath of orange, too ; and then, one morning when the summer, it would seem, had come to revisit the scenes of its brief réign, Mr. Browning kissed his bride elect, and wiped away the two big tears which dropped from her eyelashes when he told her that he was going away for that day and the next.

“ But when to-morrow’s sun is setting, I shall be with you again,” he said, and he bade her quiet the fluttering of her little heart, which throbbed so painfully at parting with him.

“ I don’t know why it is,” she said, “ I’m not one bit superstitious, but Bruno howled so dismally under my window all night, and when he ceased, a horrid owl set up a screech. I told Maria, and she said, in her country the cry of an owl was a sign that the grave was about to give up its dead, and she looked so mysterious that she frightened me all the more——”

“ That Maria is too superstitious, and I don’t like her to be with you so much,” said Mr. Browning, his own cheek turning slightly pale as he thought of the grave giving up *his* dead. Thrice he turned back to kiss the little maiden, who followed him down the avenue, and then climbed into a box-like seat, which had been built on the top of the gate-post, and was sheltered by a sycamore. “ Here,” said she, “ shall I wait for you to-

morrow night, when the sun is away over there. Oh, I wish it would hurry."

He wished so, too, and with another fond good-by they parted. The day seemed long to Rosamond, and, though she varied the time by trying on each and every one of her new dresses, she was glad when it was night, so she could go to bed and sleep the time away. The next morning the depression of spirits was gone; he was coming—she should wait for him beneath the sycamore—possibly she would hide to make him believe she was not there, and the bright blushes stole over her dimpled cheeks as she thought what he would do when he found that she *was* there.

"Ten o'clock," she said to herself, as she heard the whistle of the upward train. "Seven hours more and he will come."

Going to her room, she took a book, in which she tried to be interested, succeeding so well that, though her windows commanded a view of the avenue, she did not see the lady who came slowly up the walk, casting about her eager, curious glances, and pausing more than once to note the exceeding beauty of the place. Once she stopped for a long time, and, leaning against a tree, seemed to be debating whether to turn back or go on. Deciding upon the latter, she arose, and quickening her movements, soon stood upon the threshold. Her ring was answered by Maria, who betrayed no surprise, for from the upper hall Mrs. Peters herself was closely inspecting the visitor.

"Is Mr. Browning at home?" the lady asked.

"Gone to Buffalo," was the laconic reply, and a gleam of satisfaction flitted over the face of the questioner, who continued: "And the young lady, Miss Leyton? Has she gone, too?"

"She is here," said Maria, still keeping her eye upon the shadow bending over the balustrade. "What name shall I give her?"

"No name. I wish to surprise her," and passing on into the parlor, the stranger laid aside her hat and shawl with the air of one perfectly at home; then seating herself upon a sofa, she examined the room as curiously as she had examined the grounds of Riverside.

"It seems a pity to mar all this," she said, "and were it not that I hate him so much, I would go away forever, though that would be a greater injury to her than my coming to life will be. Of course he's told her all, and spite of her professed liking for me, she is glad that I am dead. I long, yet dread, to see her amazement; but hist—she comes."

There was the sound of little, high-heeled slippers on the stairs, the flutter of a pink morning gown, and then Rosamond Leyton stood face with—Marie Porter? The grave had given up its dead, and without any visible marks of the world prepared for such as she, save, indeed, the increased *fire* which burned in her black eyes, the risen woman sat there much as living people sit—her head bent forward—her lips apart—and a look of expectation upon her face. But she was doomed to disappointment. Rosamond knew nothing of the past, and with a cry of pleasurable surprise she started forward, exclaiming, "Oh, Miss Porter, I felt so cross when told a visitor was here, but now I know who 'tis, I am so glad, for I am very lonely to-day."

The hard woman swept her hand a moment before her eyes, and with that movement swept away the kindly spirit, which whispered, "Don't undeceive her. Don't quench the light of that bright face, nor break that girl's heart."

But it was necessary ; Marie Porter knew that, and though she repented of what she had done, it was now too late to retreat, and all she could do was to break the heart of the unsuspecting girl as tenderly as possible.

"Why are you so lonely ?" she said, "This is a most beautiful spot. I believe I'd like to live here myself."

"Oh, yes, 'tis a lovely place," answered Rosamond, "but—but—Mr. Browning is not here," and she averted her crimson face.

"Is Mr. Browning so necessary to your happiness ?" Miss Porter asked, and bringing an ottoman, Rosamond sat down at her visitor's feet and thus replied : "We talked so much of him at the Springs that it surely is not foolish in me to tell you what everybody knows. Now, you won't laugh at me, will you ? Mr. Browning and I are going to—oh, I can't tell it ; but, any way, your fortune-telling is not true."

"Mr. Browning and you are going to be married. Is that it ?" the woman asked ; and with a quick, upward glance of her soft, brown eyes, Rosamond replied, "Yes, that's it—that's it ; and oh, you can't begin to guess how happy I am. He is not *crazy* either. It was something else, though I don't know what, for he never told me, and I do not care to know. The obstacle has been removed, whatever it was, and it has wrought such a change in him. He's so much younger—handsomer, now, and so kind to me. I'm glad you've come, Miss Porter, and you'll stay till after the wedding. It's the twentieth, and he has bought me so many new things. We are going to Europe. Just think of a winter in Paris, with Mr. Browning ! But, what ! Are you *crying* ?" and Rosamond started as a burning tear fell upon her forehead.

"Rosamond Leyton," said Miss Porter, in a voice husky with emotion, "I have not wept in eight long years, but the sight of you, so innocent, so happy, wrings the tears from my stony heart, as agony will sometimes force out the drops of perspiration when the body is shivering with cold. I was young like you once, and my bridal was fixed—" She paused, and stealing an arm around her waist, Rosamond said pleadingly, "Tell me about it, Miss Porter, I always knew you had a history. Did the man die?"

"No—no. Better for me if he had—aye, and better, too, for you."

This last was a whisper, and Rosamond did not hear it. Her thoughts were bent upon the *story*, and she continued, "will it pain you too much to tell it now?"

"Yes, yes, wait," Miss Porter said, "Wait until after dinner, and meantime, as I cannot possibly stay until the twentieth, perhaps you will let me see your dresses."

Nothing could please Rosamond more, and gay as a little child, she led the way to a large upper room, which contained her wedding outfit. Proudly she displayed her treasures, flitting like a bird from one pile of finery to another, and reserving the most important until the very last.

"There's the dinner-bell," she suddenly exclaimed, "I did not think it could be *one*. Only four hours more—but come, let us go down and after dinner, if you'll never tell Mrs. Peters, nor anybody, I'll try on my bridal dress and let you see if it is becoming. I want so much to know how it looks, since Maria put the rosebuds in the berthe. And then your story. I must hear that."

As they were going down the stairs Miss Porter took Rosamond's hand and said, "How is this?—Where is my ring?"

Rosamond could not tell her of an act which now that it no longer had insanity for an excuse, puzzled her not a little. So she made some trivial excuse, which, however, did not deceive her auditor. But the latter deemed it wise to say no more just then, and silently followed her young friend into the dining-room. Dinner being over they went up to Rosamond's chamber, the closet of which contained the bridal robes.

"*Two o'clock,*" said Rosamond, consulting her watch, then bringing out the rich white satin and exquisite overskirt of lace, she continued, "I shall have just time to try this on, hear your story and get dressed before Mr. Browning comes. How short the day seems, with you here! I told him I'd be sitting in that little box which you possibly noticed, built on the gate-post against the tree.—And he'll be so disappointed not to find me there, that maybe you won't mind my leaving you awhile when the sun is right over the woods."

"Certainly not," answered Miss Porter, and the dressing-up process began, Rosamond chatting gayly all the while and asking if it were very foolish for her to try on the dress. "I should not do it," she said, "if you would stay. Can't you?"

The answer was a decided negative, and adjusting her little slipper, Rosamond stood up while her companion put over her head the satin dress. It fitted admirably, and nothing could have been fairer than the round chubby arms and plump, well-shaped shoulders which the *shortcomings* of the dress showed to good

advantage. Now the lace over-skirt—now the *berthe*—and then the veil, with the orange-wreath twined among the flowing curls, and Rosamond was dressed at last.

“How do I look?” she asked, but Marie Porter made no immediate reply, and as she gazed upon the young girl, so beautiful, so innocent and unsuspecting, who can tell of the keen anguish at her heart, or how she shrank from the bitter task which she must do, and quickly, too, for the clock pointed to *three*, and her plan was now to strike the *dove* and then flee ere the *eagle* came. She would thus wound him more deeply, for the very uncertainty would add fresh poison to his cup of agony.

“How do I look?” Rosamond asked again, and after duly complimenting the dress, Miss Porter added, “I promised you my story, and if I tell it at all to-day, I must begin it now, for it is long, and I would finish it ere Mr. Browning comes.”

“Very well, I’m all attention,” said Rosamond, and like a lamb before its slaughterer she knelt before the woman, bending low her graceful head to have the wreath removed.

This done, Miss Porter said, “Have you any camphor handy, or hartshorn? I am sometimes faint and may want them.”

“Yes, both, here, in the bathing-room,” said Rosamond, and she brought them to the lady, who placed them upon the table—not for herself, but for one who would need them more—for poor, poor Rosamond. The disrobing proceeded slowly, for the little girl was well pleased with the figure reflected by the mirror. But Miss Porter could not wait, and when the wreath, the veil, and *berthe* were removed, she seated herself

by the window in a position which commanded a full view of her victim's face ; and forcing down the throbbings of her heart, which it seemed to her were audible in that silent room, she commenced the story.

CHAPTER X.

THE STORY.

"My home," began Miss Porter, "is, as you know, in Florida. I am an only child, as were both my parents, so that I have now living no nearer relative than a great uncle—a superannuated clergyman, who superintends my affairs, and who, in case I die before he does, which is very probable, will be heir to my possessions.

"It is now nearly ten years since my father started for Europe, and I went to an adjoining state to visit a widow lady, whom I had met in New Orleans the winter previous. It is not necessary that I should use real names, consequently I will call her Mrs. Le Vert. She was spending the summer on her plantation, at what she called her country-seat. It was a large, old-fashioned, wooden building, many miles from any neighbors, and here she lived alone—for her only son, a lad twelve years of age, was at some northern school. At first I was very lonely, for the secluded life we led at Holly Grove was hardly in accordance with the taste of a young girl. Still, I did not mind it as much as some, for I cared but little for gentlemen's society, and had frequently declared that I should never marry.

"Toward the last of July, Mrs. Le Vert's brother came to visit her. He was a handsome, boyish-looking youth, six months older than myself—just out of college—full of life and very fond of pretty girls, particularly if they chanced to be wealthy."

"That's a little like Ben," said Rosamond, and Miss Porter continued :

"From the first, Mrs. Le Vert seemed determined to make a match between us, for her brother was poor, and she fancied it would be a fine idea to have the Porter estate come into the Dunlap family. So she threw us constantly together—talked of me to him and of him to me, until I really began to believe I liked him. He, on the contrary, cared for nothing but my money. Still he deemed it advisable to assume a show of affection, and one night talked to me of love quite eloquently. I had been to a dinner party that day, and had worn all my diamonds. He had never seen them before, and they must have inflamed his avarice, for I afterward heard him tell his sister that he never should have proposed if I had not looked so beautiful that night. '*I was irresistible in my diamonds,*' he said."

Miss Porter paused a moment to witness the effect of her last words, but Rosamond was looking over her shoulder at a *wrinkle* she had just discovered in the waist, and did not heed them. Still she was listening, and she said, "Yes—go on. You were looking beautifully that night. Did you consent to marry him?"

"Unhappily, I did," returned Miss Porter, "for I had made myself believe that I loved him. I wished that he was older, to be sure, but he said we would wait until he was of age. This plan, however, did not suit his ambitious sister. She knew I intended asking my father's approval, and from what she heard of him she feared he would never consent to my marrying a poor student, and she urged an immediate union. But I persisted in writing to my father, who answered immediately, forbidding me to think of young Dunlap, ordering me to go home, and saying he always intended

me for John Castlewell, a neighbor of ours—a millionaire—a *booby*—a *fool*—whom I hated as I did poison.

“Not long after the receipt of this letter I was surprised by the sudden appearance of Uncle Bertram, who had come at my father’s request to take me home. This roused me at once. My father was a tyrant, I said, and I would let him know I could do as I pleased. In my excitement, I fancied I could not exist a moment without Richard Dunlap, while he declared that life would be a blank for him if passed away from me. At this opportune moment Mrs. Le Vert suggested that we be married immediately—that very night. Uncle Bertram fortunately was a clergyman, and could officiate as well as any other. In justice to Richard, I will say that he hesitated longer than I did—but he was persuaded at last, as was Uncle Bertram, and with no other witness than Mrs. Le Vert and a white woman who lived with her as half waiting-maid and half companion, we were married.”

Rosamond was interested now, and forgetting to remove her dress, she threw a crimson shawl around her shoulders, and sitting down upon the bed, exclaimed, “Married! You married! Why, then, are you called Porter?”

“Listen and you shall know,” returned the lady, a dark look settling down upon her face.

“Scarcely was the ceremony over, when I began to regret it—not because I disliked Richard, but because I dreaded my father’s displeasure, for he had a most savage, revengeful temper, and his daughter possesses the same.” This was bitterly spoken, and she continued—“Hardly an hour after we were married, a negro brought a letter to Richard from an eccentric old man for whom he had been named. In it the old

man said he had made his namesake his heir, provided he did not marry until he was *twenty-five*.

“ ‘ I know just how *frillickin’* you are,’ he wrote, ‘ and I know, too, how unsuitable and how unhappy most early marriages are—so my boy, if you want Sunnyside, wait till you are twenty-five before you take an extra rib. I hate to be bothered with letters, and if you don’t answer this, I shall conclude that you accept my terms.’ ”

“ Mrs. Le Vert at once suggested that, as the old gentleman had already had two fits of apoplexy, and would undoubtedly soon have the third, our marriage should for a time be kept a secret.”

“ But he didn’t consent,” cried Rosamond.

“ Yes, he did,” answered Miss Porter, “ and though I, too, said it would be best, I began to distrust him from that moment—to think that he preferred money to myself. Uncle Bertram promised secrecy and went back alone, and then commenced a life of wretchedness, which makes me shudder even to recall it. With the exception of my own servant, who dared not tell if I bade her be silent, the blacks knew nothing of our marriage, and though we lived together as man and wife, so skilfully did Mrs. Le Vert and Esther, her white domestic, manage the matter, that for a time our secret was safely kept. A few of the negroes discovered it ere I left; but as they always lived in that out-of-the-way place, it never followed me, and to this day no human being in Florida, save Uncle Bertram, knows of the marriage.

“ I am very impulsive, and the excitement being over, my affection began to cool. Richard could have kept it alive had he tried, but he did not. On the contrary he was much alone, and when with me was

always tormenting me with conscientious scruples about deceiving 'the old man.'"

"Oh, I like him for that," cried Rosamond, "I like him for that. Why didn't you let him tell?"

"Because," returned Miss Porter, "I had fears that father would disinherit *me*, and if Richard lost Sunnyside, we should be poor indeed."

A shadow passed over Rosamond's face, and she said involuntarily, "I could be happy with Mr. Browning if we *were* poor."

Marie started and answered quickly, "What has *Mr. Browning* to do with my story?"

"Nothing, nothing," returned Rosamond, "only I was thinking that if you loved Richard as well as I do Mr. Browning, you would not have cared for money."

"But I didn't," returned Marie. "I was mistaken. 'Twas a mere childish fancy. I never loved him. *I hate him now.*"

She spoke vehemently, and when Rosamond said mournfully, "Hate your husband!" she replied, "Yes, more than *hate*, or I had never come to tell you this; but listen—from indifference we came to coldness—from coldness to recrimination—from that to harsh words—from harsh words to quarrels—and from quarrels to *blows*!"

She uttered the last word slowly, while Rosamond exclaimed, "Not *blows*, Miss Porter! No man would strike a woman. *I almost hate him, now.*"

The proud lip curled scornfully—a gleam of satisfaction shot from the keen black eyes, and Marie went on. "He would say—nay does say *I* was the most to blame—that I aggravated him beyond human endurance—but he provoked me to it. Think of his *swearing* at me, Rosamond—calling me a *she-devil* and all that.

Think, too, of his telling me to my face that he was driven into the marriage wholly by his sister—that he regretted it more than I, and to crown all, think of his *boxing my ears!*—he, a poor, insignificant Northern puppy, boxing me—a Porter, and a Southern heiress!”

She was terribly excited, and Rosamond, gazing at her face, distorted with malignant passion, began to fancy that the greater wrong might perhaps have lain with her.

After a moment's pause, Marie began again. “When we had been three months man and wife, he wrote to the old man, confessing his marriage, and saying sundry things not wholly complimentary to his bride; but I intercepted it, read it, tore it up, and taunted him with it. I believe I called him a low-lived Yankee, or something like that, and then it was he struck me. The blow sunk deep into my soul. It was an insult, an unpardonable insult, and could not be forgiven. My Southern blood was all on fire, and had I been a man, he should have paid for that blow. I feel it yet; the smart has never for a moment left me, but burns upon my face just as hatred for him burns upon my heart!”

“Oh, Miss Porter,” cried Rosamond, as the former ground her teeth together, “don't look so terribly. You frighten me. He struck you, but he asked your pardon, sure?”

“Yes, he pretended to, but I spat at him and bade him leave me forever. His sister tried to interfere, but she made the matter worse, and as my father was on the eve of embarking for America, I determined to go home, and when he came, tell him the whole and ask him to seek satisfaction from one who had dared to hurt his daughter. Richard made a show of try-

ing to keep me—said we had better live together, and all that, while his sister called us two silly children who needed whipping. But I did not heed it. I went home to Uncle Bertram and waited for my father, who never came. He died upon the sea, and I was heir of all his vast possessions. Then Richard made overtures for reconciliation, but I spurned them all. You've heard of *woman-haters*, Rosamond—I am a *man-hater*. I loathe the whole sex, Uncle Bertram excepted. My marriage was of course a secret in Florida. My servant, who knew of it, died soon after my father, and as Uncle Bertram kept his own counsel, more than one sought my hand, but I turned my back upon them all.

“Four or five years ago he wrote me a letter. He was then master of Sunnyside, for the old man left it to him after all. He was lonely there, he said, and he asked a reconciliation. Had he never struck me, I might have gone, for his letter was kindly enough, but the blow was a barrier between us, so I refused to listen, and exulted over the thought of his living there alone all his days with the secret on his mind.

“The sweetest morsel of all in the cup of revenge was, however, for a time withheld, but it came at last, Rosamond. It came at last. He loved a beautiful young girl, loved her all the more that he could not marry her.”

She drew nearer to Rosamond, who, though still unsuspecting, trembled from head to foot with an undefinable emotion of coming evil.

“I saw her, Rosamond; saw this young girl with his name upon her lips when waking—saw her, too, with his name upon her lips when sleeping, and all this while she did not dream that *I*, the so-called Marie

Porter, was his wife, the barrier which kept him from saying the words her little heart longed so to hear."

There were livid spots on Rosamond's neck—livid spots upon her face, and still she did not move from her seat, though her clammy hand clutched nervously her bridal dress. A *horrid* suspicion had flashed upon her, but with a mighty effort she threw it off as injustice to Mr. Browning, and mentally crying, "It cannot be," she faintly whispered, "Go on."

"The summer I met her," said Miss Porter, "I was at Cartersville, a little out-of-the-way place on a lake——"

"You're telling me true?" interrupted Rosamond, joy thrilling in her tones.

"Yes, true," returned Miss Porter.

"Then bless you—bless you for those last words," rejoined Rosamond, burying her face in her companion's lap. "A terrible fear for a moment came over me, that it might be *I*. But it isn't. *I* met you at the Springs. Oh, if it had been me. I should most surely die."

"But *she* did not—the young girl," resumed Miss Porter. "She had a brave, strong heart, and she bore up wondrously. She felt that he had cruelly deceived her, and that helped her to bear the blow. Besides, she was glad she knew of it in time, for, had he married her, she would not have been his wife, you know." Rosamond shuddered and replied, "I know, but my heart would have broken all the same. It aches so now for her. But go on, how did she find it out? Who could have strength to tell her?"

There was a pause, and each could hear the beating of the other's heart. The November wind had risen within the last half hour, and now howled dismally past the window, seeming to Rosamond like the wail that

young girl must have uttered when she first learned how her trust had been betrayed. *The clock struck four!* Rosamond counted each stroke, and thought, "One hour more, and *he* will be here." Marie counted each stroke, and thought, "One hour more, and I must be gone."

"Rosamond," she began again, "what I now have to confess is an act of which I have repented bitterly, and never more than since I sat within this room. But it was not premeditated, and believe me, Rosamond, it was not done for any malice I bore to that young girl, for I pitied her so much—oh, so much," and her hand wandered caressingly over the bright hair lying on her lap.

"We went out one afternoon—two ladies, a gentleman, and myself—in a small sail-boat upon the lake. I planned the excursion and thought I should enjoy it, but we had not been out long when my old affection of the heart began to trouble me. I grew faint, and begged of them to put me on the land. They complied with my request, and set me down upon a point higher up than that from which we had embarked, and near to a dilapidated cabin where lived a weird old hag, who earned a scanty livelihood by fortune-telling. I told her I was sick, and sat down by her door where I could watch the movements of the party. Suddenly a terrific thunder-storm arose, the wind blew a hurricane, and though the boat rode the billows bravely for a time, it capsized at length, and its precious freight disappeared beneath the foaming waves. For a moment horror chilled my blood; then, swift as the lightning which leaped from the cloud overhanging the graves of my late companions, a maddening thought flashed upon my mind."

"But the girl—hasten to that part," said Rosamond, lifting up her head, while Miss Porter went back to her chair.

"I shall come to her soon enough," returned Miss Porter, continuing her story. "No living being, save the old woman at my side, knew of my escape, and I could bribe her easily. Fortunately I carried the most of my money about my person, and I said to her, 'There are reasons why, for a time at least, I wish to be considered dead. Here are twenty dollars now, and the same shall be paid you every month that you are silent. No human creature must know that I am living.' I saw by the kindling of her eye at the sight of the gold that I was safe, and when the night shadows were falling I stole from her cabin, and taking a circuitous route to avoid observation, I reached the midway station in time for the evening train.

"Three days later in a distant city I read of the sad catastrophe—read that all had been found but one, a Miss Porter, from Florida, and as I read I thought '*he* will see that, too.' He did see it. Before going to Carterville I sent to Sunnyside a girl who was under peculiar obligations to me, and one whom I could trust. She secured the place. She was employed at last about the person of that young girl, *who had lived at Sunnyside since she was a child a friendless orphan.*"

There was a quick, gasping moan as if the soul were parting from the body, and Rosamond fell upon her face which the pillows concealed from view, while Miss Porter hurriedly proceeded:

"There is but little more to tell. I wrote to the girl who took her own letters from the office. I told her all and from her heard that the bridal day was fixed,

The obstacle was removed—not *insanity*, but a *wiving wife*. Need I say more?"

She paused, but from the bed where the crushed, motionless figure lay, there came no sound, and she said again, "Speak, Rosamond. Curse me, if you will, for saving you from an unlawful marriage."

Still there was no sound, save the low sighing of the wind, which seemed to have taken a fresh note of sadness as if bewailing the unutterable desolation of the young girl, who lay so still and lifeless that Marie Porter's heart quickened with fear, and drawing near, she touched the little hand resting on the pillow. It was cold—rigid—as was also the face which she turned to the light.

"*It is death!*" she cried, and a wild shriek rang through the house, bringing at once the servants, headed by Mrs. Peters.

"*What is it?*" cried the latter, as she saw the helpless figure and beautiful upturned face.

"*It's death, madam—death*, and it's coming on me, too," answered Miss Porter, clasping her hands over her heart, which throbbed as it never had done before, and which at last prostrated her upon the lounge.

But no one heeded her, save the girl Maria. The rest gave their attention to Rosamond, who lay so long in the death-like stupor that others than Miss Porter believed her dead.

The clock struck five! and echoing from the Granby hills the engine-whistle came. Then a slight tremor ran through her frame, and Mrs. Peters whispered joyfully, "There's life—there's hope."

Along the highway the returning traveler came with rapid tread, but 'neath the sycamore no Rosamond was waiting.

"She is hiding from me," he said, but his search for her was vain, and he rapidly hastened on.

All about the house was still. There was no Rosamond at the door—nor in the hall—nor in the parlor—nor on the stairs; but from her chamber came the buzz of voices, and he entered unannounced, recoiling backward when he saw the face upon the pillow, and knew that it was Rosamond's. Every particle of color had left it; there were dark circles beneath the eyes, and a look about the mouth as if the concentrated agony of years had fallen suddenly upon her.

"What is it?" he asked, and at the sound of his voice, the brown eyes he had been wont to call so beautiful unclosed, but their sunny brightness was all gone, and he shuddered at their dim, meaningless expression.

She seemed to know him, and stretching her arm toward him as a child does toward its mother when danger threatens, she laid her head upon his bosom with a piteous wail—the only really audible sound she had yet uttered.

"Rosamond, darling—what has come upon you?" he said, "and why are you in your bridal dress?"

At that word she started, and moving away from him, moaned sadly, "It was cruel—oh, so cruel to deceive me, when I loved and trusted him so much."

"Won't somebody tell me what this means?" he demanded, and Mrs. Peters replied, "We do not know. There's been a strange woman here, and she was with Rosamond when it happened."

"Woman? What woman? And where is she now?" he asked, and Mrs. Peters replied, "She was faint—dying," she said, and Maria took her into another chamber."

Mechanically he started for that chamber—hearing nothing—seeing nothing—thinking nothing for the nameless terror which had fallen upon him. He did not suspect the real truth. He merely had a vague presentiment that some one who knew nothing of the drowning had come there to save his Rosamond from what they supposed to be an unlawful marriage, and when at last he stood face to face with his living wife, when he knew the grave had given up its dead, he dropped to the floor as drops the giant oak when felled by the lightning's power!

Marie Porter, even had she been cruelly wronged, was avenged—fully, amply avenged, and covering her face with her hands, she moaned, “I have killed them both, and there's nothing left for me now but to die!”

CHAPTER XI.

THE END.

OVER the horrid awakening which came to the wretched man, we need not linger; neither is it necessary to dwell upon the first few days of mystery and dread, when death seemed brooding over Riverside, and rumor was busy with surmises and suspicions concerning the stranger, and the relation, if any, which she bore to Rosamond Leyton. We will rather hasten on to the morning when to Mr. Browning the joyful tidings came that Rosamond was better—so much better, indeed, that he could see and talk with her if he chose.

Only once since the fearful night when he found her moaning in her bridal dress, had he stood by her bedside—for though he longed to be there, he could not endure to see her turn away from him, whispering as she did so, “It was cruel—oh, so cruel to deceive me so.” Neither had he been near Marie Porter, consequently he knew nothing of the means by which she had imposed upon him the story of her death. But Rosamond knew—Rosamond could tell him, and from no other lips would he hear it. So, when he learned that she was better, he asked to see her alone, and Mrs. Peters, to whom he had necessarily confided the story of his marriage, carried his message to Rosamond.

For a moment Rosamond did not seem to hear. but

when the message was repeated, the great tears forced themselves from beneath her long eyelashes, and rolling down her cheeks, dropped upon the pillow.

"He might have spared me this," she said, "but if it is his wish, I can see him."

With a mighty effort she stilled the violent throbbings of her heart, forced an unnatural calm upon her face and whispered—"Let him come now; I am ready."

He was standing without the door, so near that he heard the words, and in a moment he was at her side. Falling upon his knees before her, he clasped her hands in his, imploring her forgiveness for the great wrong he had done her in not telling her the truth at first. "But I am innocent of the last," he said; "believe me, Rosamond, I thought her dead, or I had never asked you to be my wife. I know not how she deceived me so terribly, but you know, and I have sought this interview to hear the story from your own lips. Will you tell it to me, darling—Miss Leyton, I mean," he added hastily, as he saw a shadow of pain flit over her face.

"I will if I can," she faintly answered, and summoning all her strength, she repeated to him what Miss Porter had told her, except, indeed, the parts with which she knew he was familiar.

"The plot was worthy of her who planned it," he said bitterly; then, as Rosamond made no reply, he continued—"she told you, I suppose, of our married life, and painted me the blackest villain that ever trod the earth. This may in part be true, but, Rosamond, though I may never know the bliss of calling you my wife, I cannot be thus degraded in your sight and offer no apology. I was a boy—a self-willed, high-tempered boy, nineteen years of age, and she aggravated me be-

yond all human endurance, seeking ways and means by which she could provoke me. I loved her at first—nay, do not turn away incredulously. Heaven is my witness that I loved her, or thought I did, but 'twas a boyish love, and not such as I feel for you."

"You swore at her," said Rosamond, unable to reconcile love with an oath.

"Once—only once," he replied. "I blush to own it, for it was not a manly act."

"You struck her," and for the first time since he had been in that room the brown eyes rested full upon his face.

"Yes, Rosamond," he answered; "I own that, too, but she goaded me to madness, and even raised her voice against my sainted mother, who had borne so dastardly a son as *I*!"

"And Riverside?" said Rosamond. "Did your uncle die deceived?"

"Never—never," Mr. Browning exclaimed, starting to his feet. "I told the whole truth, or I would not have lived here a day. Rosamond, I have greatly sinned, but she has not been blameless. She insulted me in every possible way, even to giving *you* her *wedding ring*, and then, lest I should not see it, wrote to me 'to look upon your finger.' No wonder you thought me mad!"

"Her *wedding ring*! Could she do that?" said Rosamond.

"Yes, her wedding ring. It first belonged to Susan, who gave it to me for the occasion, and two weeks after I had it marked with Marie's name and the date of our marriage. It is broken now, and I would to Heaven I could thus easily break the tie which binds me to her, and keeps me from you! Oh, Rosamond,

Rosamond, must it be? Must I live my life without you, when I need you so much—when my heart longs so to claim you for its own?”

He covered his face with his hands, and Rosamond could see the tears dropping slowly through his fingers. Terribly was he expatiating the sin of his boyhood, and what wonder is it, if, in his agony, he cried, “My punishment is greater than I can bear!”

Rosamond alone was calm. She seemed to have wept her tears away, and the blow which had fallen so crushingly upon her, had benumbed her heart, so that she now did not feel as acutely as the weeping man before her. Very soothingly, she spoke to him, but she offered no word of cheer—no hope that all would yet be well. “They would bear it with brave hearts,” she said, “And he must be reconciled to his wife.”

“Never—never,” he exclaimed. “The same roof cannot shelter us both, and if she chooses to stay when she is better, she is welcome to Riverside, but I cannot share it with her.”

Neither said to the other, “It may be she will die,” for such a thought had never intruded itself upon their minds, and yet Marie Porter’s life was numbered now by days. The heart disease, from which she had long been suffering, was greatly aggravated by the strong nervous excitement through which she had recently been passing. Stimulants of a most powerful kind had created a kind of artificial strength, which had enabled her to come to Riverside, but this was fast subsiding; and when she bent over the motionless form of Rosamond, and feared that she was dead, she felt, indeed, that death would ere long claim her as his own. The sight of her husband, too, had well-nigh been more than she could bear. For nearly nine long years she

had not looked upon his face, but she remembered it well—a handsome, boyish face. His hair she remembered, too—his soft, dark, wavy hair, through which her fingers had sometimes strayed, in the far back days at Holly Wood, before she was his bride. He would not be greatly changed, she thought; and when, on that fatal night, she heard his coming footsteps, she pictured him in her mind much as he was that winter-day, when, standing in his sister's door, he bade her a long good-by. Nearer and nearer he had come—faster and louder had beaten her heart, while a cold, faint sickness crept over her.

“Open the window—I cannot breathe,” she gasped; but ere her request was obeyed, Ralph Browning had fainted on the threshold, and she had asked that she might die.

She had seen him only for an instant, but that sufficed to tell her he was changed from the dark-haired, handsome boy, into the gray-haired suffering man. His eyes had met hers, but the fierce hatred she expected, was not there; and the look of utter hopeless despair which she saw in its place, touched her as reproach and resentment could not have done.

“Oh, I hope I shall die,” she said, as she hid her face in the pillow. “I hope I shall die.”

This wish she uttered every hour; and when, at last, the physician said to her, “Madam, you *will* die,” she answered, “It is well!”

She did not ask for Mr. Browning, for she knew he would not come, but she inquired anxiously each day for Rosamond; and when, at last, she heard they were together, she laid her hand upon her heart, and watching its rise and fall, smiled to think how fast her life was going out.

"Listen, Maria," she said, "Listen to what they say, and hear if they talk of me."

Noiselessly Maria glided to the door of Rosamond's chamber—stood there for a moment and then as noiselessly came repeating to her mistress the substance of what she had heard, together with sundry little embellishments of her own.

"He will give you Riverside and go away himself," she said, and Miss Porter quickly rejoined, "Go where? Go with whom?"

"With Miss Leyton of course," returned Maria. "He said he would not live without her."

"The wretch!" ejaculated the angry woman, all her softer emotions giving way to this fancied insult. "He might at least wait now until I'm dead. I'll go to him myself, and see if in my presence he dare talk thus to her."

She was greatly excited, and spite of the painful throbbings of her heart and the dizzy sensation she felt stealing over her, she stepped upon the floor, and hurriedly crossed the room. The effort was too much for her feeble strength, and she sank fainting upon a chair. The girl Maria had seen her faint before, but never before had she seen so fearful a look upon her face, and she ran in terror to Mr. Browning, beseeching him to come "for her mistress was dying sure, and would trouble nobody much more."

For a moment he hesitated, but when Rosamond said "Go," he went. Taking the fainting woman in his arms he laid her upon the bed as gently, though not as tenderly as he would have lain his Rosamond there.

"Call Mrs. Peters," he said, and when that matron came, he bade her give to the invalid every possible care.

Slowly Miss Porter came back to life, but it was only to faint again, and with each fainting fit it became more and more apparent that life was ebbing fast. They did not say to Rosamond that she would die, but they told it to Mr. Browning, who heard as one who hears not. Every other sensation seemed to have given place to a feeling of horror, and when at the close of the second day word came to him that she *was dying*, and had asked to see him, he arose mechanically and walked to her sick room as calmly as he had visited it the previous night, when he knew she was asleep. One glance, however, at her white face and wild bright eyes roused him to the reality, and bending over her pillow, he forced himself to take her hand in his, saying kindly, "Marie, do you know me?"

"Know you?" "Yes," she answered. "You are my husband—my husband." She lingered upon that name as if its sound recalled to life some olden feeling—some memory of Holly Wood, where they first had met.

"Marie, you are dying," he continued. "Shall we part in anger, or in peace?"

"In peace, if you will," she answered. "I have had my revenge—but it is *not* sweet as some say it is. I would rather, Ralph, that I had never known you, for then I should not have been the wicked wretch I am."

Mr. Browning did not reply to this, and for a few moments there was silence, during which she seemed to sleep. Rousing up ere long, she gasped for breath, and grasping nervously her husband's hand, she whispered, "I am going now—there's no sham this time—five minutes more, and you are free to marry Rosamond. Be kind to her, Ralph. Deal with her not as you dealt with me, and—and—come closer to me,

Ralph. Let me whisper this last so as so one can hear."

He bent him down to listen, and summoning all her strength, she said, not in a whisper, but in tones which echoed through the silent room—"NEVER, NEVER STRIKE ROSAMOND, WILL YOU?"

* * * * *

Rapidly the story circulated that the strange woman who lay dead at Riverside had been Ralph Browning's wife, and hundreds flocked to the funeral, hoping to gain a view of the deceased. But in this they were disappointed, for there was nothing visible, save the handsome coffin, on whose silver plate was inscribed the word "MARIE."

Some said that "Browning" might have been added to the name, and while others marveled that the husband wore no badge of mourning, a few said wisely that the *mourning* was visible in other than the usual signs—in the hair gray before its time, and in the deep-cut lines which a *living* sorrow alone had made. And so, amid surmises of the past and foretellings of the future, the ill-fated Marie was laid in the village vault, until word could be received from her old uncle, who might wish to have her rest among the balmy groves and fragrant flowers of her beautiful Florida home.

And now our story winds to its close. Ralph Browning was free indeed, but death had been at Riverside, and the shadow it had left must disappear ere he took to himself a second bride. Rosamond, too, must recover from the blow which had fallen so crushingly on her—must learn to confide again in the man she loved—to think of the great wrong he had done her as the result of an early, boyish error, which he regretted even more bitterly than herself.

And so the warm spring rains had fallen and the April blossoms were bursting from the dark, moist earth ere the wedding morning came. At the bridal there was no satin dress—no orange wreath—no flowing veil—but there was perfect love shining in the beautiful brown eyes of the girlish bride, while the fine face of the bridegroom wore a look of perfect happiness, as if the past were all forgotten, and the world was bright and new. Europe was still their destination, and among those who accompanied them to New York, going with them even to the vessel's deck, none bade them a more affectionate adieu than Mrs. Van Vechten herself. She had spent a part of the winter at Riverside, and had learned to appreciate the gentle girl who she knew was to be her brother's wife.

Ben, too, was of the party. He had listened in amazement to the story of his uncle's first marriage, wondering how it could have been kept from him, and remembering several little incidents, the meaning of which he now understood. He had given up the Crimean war, as well as the dancing girl, and now he had given up Rosamond, too, but he bore it quite heroically, and ever after took especial pains to speak of her as "*My Aunt Rosamond*." For more than a year the bridal pair remained abroad, and then returned again to Riverside, where now the patter of tiny feet, and the voice of childhood is heard, for children have gathered around the hearthstone, and in all the world there is not a prouder, happier wife and mother than the little Rosamond who once on a dreary November day listened, with a breaking heart, to the story of Ralph Browning's Youthful Error.

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